

“As For Me and My House”

A sermon preached in MacNeill Baptist Church

August 25, 2024

Bert Radford

Sinclair Ross’s novel, *As for Me and My House* is a foundational work of Canadian literature. A story of a wife and husband living in Saskatchewan during the dust bowl thirties, it probes the impact of those terrible times on the lives of the people who lived them. Philip and Mrs. Bentley (we are never given her name) are representative of thousands of people who endured a drought that dried their land and left their top soil blowing in the wind, scourges of grasshoppers that consumed the meagre crops they coaxed from the soil, falling wheat prices as the financial centres were mired in depression.

Philip Bentley was a frustrated artist whose paintings did not sell, who became a minister to make ends meet. But his heart was not in it. The tiny congregations in the little prairie villages would soon sense his disillusionment and he would move on.

He really had only one sermon which he would preach on the first Sunday at the church. Mrs. Bentley describes it:

His sermon for tomorrow is spread out on the little table by the bed, the text that he always uses for his first Sunday. *As For Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord*. It’s a stalwart, four-square, Christian sermon. It nails his colours to the mast. It declares to the town his creed, lets them know what they may expect. The Word of God as revealed in Holy Writ — Christ Crucified — salvation through His Grace — those are the things that Philip stands for.

Except he does not stand for them. He has abandoned all hope and probably faith too. He moves from village to village, a bitter, depressed man going through the motions with his estranged and remote wife struggling along with him. Let’s look at the source of the title of this novel, that was Phillip’s text and, today, mine too. “As for me and my house”.

Joshua has succeeded Moses and is leading the people into Canaan. The Bible account is of great and glorious battles and walls crumbling and of victorious Israelites occupying the land. We are going to have to talk about this belief in a “promised land” and the conquest of it, but for now let’s look at Joshua’s challenge, “Choose this day whom you will serve.”

The Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, were nomadic by nature and the various, distinct, tribes were always on the move, battling over land and driving each other out. The Israelites moved into the land, settled where they could and vied for land like the rest, living next to the various Canaanite tribes, and when at peace shared their cultures and their religion, intermarrying and assimilating with them. Joshua fearing the Israelites would lose their identity, challenged them to choose whom they would serve the Canaanite gods or “the Lord” as he referred to their ancestral God, and concludes with a ringing challenge “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

So the sermon began to write itself. The church today is like the Israelites of those days surrounded by other cultures, other religions, challenged on every side, abandoned by many who are assimilating into popular culture and beliefs. We need to choose whether we hold fast the faith, redouble our efforts and try, in our small environment, to turn the tide. We might, ourselves, proclaim with Joshua, "As for me and my house, my church, we will serve the Lord".

That's what the Israelites did; they rallied round Joshua and proclaimed that they would serve the Lord the God of Abraham and Isaac and Moses and Joshua. They burst into a psalm of praise to God, "God brought us up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way ..." But then, the next line spoils the whole sermon.

"And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God." They had conquered the people of the land and drove them out and claimed the land and firmly believed that God had led them through their battles. When I read that I realized that is exactly what our ancestors did in our land.

It began on July 24, 1534 with a crude cross raised somewhere on the Gaspé and an elated Jacques Cartier claiming the whole land for God and the King of France. It spread from there across the entire continent. We claimed the land and drove out the indigenous people, and we believed God was with us.

This became the central issue of the sermon. It's not an easy sermon. The Jewish faith and, subsequently, our Christian faith are built on the concept of the promised land, that God gave Canaan to the Israelites and they were justified in driving out the indigenous people. We borrowed the idea, assumed that God gave us the Land of Canada and occupied the people's land, never honouring the treaties we signed with them.

But you may be thinking, "It's in the Bible, the inspired Word, that God would lead his people to a promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey." For Christians "the promised land" became a metaphor for North America, the new Eden, and particularly in the United States, the source of the American Dream. Neil Diamond sang a song extolling the virtues of America titled, "Living in the promised land."

Our concern that because it is in the Bible God really did give Canaan to his people and they are entitled to it even now, turns on the word "inspired". Was the inspiration of God a process of dictation so every word was written by God, or is the inspiration of God a process of God's spirit indwelling in the human mind and soul and guiding and leading the inquiring mind in its upward journey to God. Does God inspire from outside the human mind and soul remote from our thoughts and emotions or does God dwell within us, guiding our struggle for truth, rejoicing in our success and agonizing over our failures, but ever encouraging and lifting the soul along the higher way? I believe the latter.

So when they said that God drove out the Amalekites, they were speaking from their emerging understanding of God in which the killing of their enemies was the way God worked. But as an old T-shirt said, "God wasn't finished with them yet". The process of

God's self revelation mid the foment and frenzy of daily life continued and God's people learned ever more about God and drew closer to the heart of love.

The prophets spoke of the day when all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood would be burned as fuel for the fire. Jesus said "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies".

I believe that the progressive inspiration of God in the scriptures and in the life of the church leads us ever closer to God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the centuries continues to lead us into truth. "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word." Always remember that, as Jesus bade farewell to his followers, he promised them, "The spirit will lead you into all truth".

This is what we, the church, must grapple with today as we chose to serve the Lord. We must accept the history of our nation and bear the sins of prior times visited on us in the ongoing shame of our treatment of the indigenous people of our land. We must reach out to a jaded nation that grows complacent, benefiting from the aggression of our ancestors, reach out to them and gently proclaim a better way, the way of compassion and sensitivity and restoration.

What we can not do is go the way of Philip Bentley, going through the routines of worship but not really hearing the voice of the Spirit, lapsing into cynicism and self pity that loses touch with the vital Spirit within.

John Robinson was a vicar in the Anglican church at the turning of the 17th century. He became Puritan in the aftermath of the reformation and was harried out of England. He took his small congregation to Amsterdam in 1608 where he became a separatist and joined the Congregationalist movement. They were first cousins to us Baptists. Robinson, in a sermon that became foundational to his church, coined the words that George Matheson used in a well-loved hymn expressing the truth that underlies this sermon.

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect, crude, partial, and confined.
No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred:
*The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from His Word.*

Creator, Christ, and Spirit, send Us increase from above;
Enlarge, expand all Christian souls to comprehend Thy love,
And lead us as we onward go with nobler powers conferred:
*The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from His Word.*

"Chose this day whom you will serve". The voice wrings out across the ages challenging our consciences in difficult times for the church. Will we cling to a fixed understanding of God which denies the working of the spirit? Will we freeze-frame the development of our thought and practice so it is fixed, unchangeable? or will we remain open to the moving of

the Spirit within the church and continue to follow God's leading into new paths of service?
Will we have the courage to address old wrongs with new remedies, put aside old bias and prejudice and follow the Spirit into an unknown future?
Will we have the courage to borrow Joshua's enduring words of commitment, and proclaim,
"As for me and my house we will serve the Lord, the God of living truth.?"

I leave you with the questions but add a gentle reminder:

New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.

In the name of the Creator, The redeemer and the Sustainer, Amen