

1982-2001+: *Our Joshuas and Innocents*
Joshua 1:1-9
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Rick Jensen
First Christian Church
***“O, Generations!”* SSS**

INTRODUCTION

I draw your attention to the insert to see where the “civic,” Millennial generation falls among the 6 generations we are broadly covering here. Last week we showed the pendulum swinging back and forth between overprotective and under protective parenting. This week we can show a similar pendulum, but in regard to individualism and community. In the late 1800’s, when the Lost Generation was being born, everyone was out for themselves. It was a highly individualistic time in American culture. The Lost was the last GenX-like reactive generation. As babies were being born at the turn of the, then, new 20th century, not only were children more protected than the Lost, focus was upon restoring a stronger sense of community. We have seen the result of this in the teamwork that marked American combatants in WWII. This community-centered focus persisted through the early years of the Silent Generation.

As with every Idealist generation like the Boomers a focus on individualism emerges. Because the outer world has stabilized, following the Depression and WWII, people started focusing on their inner world and on their personal spirituality. Individualism was raised from the dead.

This individualism has solidified and deepened with GenXers and the Millennial generation. People's inner world has gotten all the attention while infrastructure symbolizing community consciousness cracks to the point of threatening whole communities, as we saw with Katrina in New Orleans and now among the levees along the Missouri River. Institutions have withered to the point that they may be flooded by prolonged culture wars that suddenly seem dated and passé. The hope is that a new hero, a new G.I. generation, a new Joshua will arise, restore community-mindedness and save the day!

SCRIPTURE: Joshua 1:1-9

If anyone is under the illusion that children are treated from one generation to another exactly alike, all we need do is look at movies about children that came out during the 13'er/GenX generation (1961-1981) versus movies about children that came out during the Millennial generation (1982-2001+). We aren't talking about a rare flick here and there. We're talking about a whole raft of movies about kids unique to each of these generations:

Let's start where we left off last week with the GenXers. Remember the names of the movies that came out when they were kids? *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* series; *Children of the Corn*, *Chucky*, and *Firestarter*. All these implied that children were the work of the devil,

which said a whole lot more about adults' perception of children than anything about who children really are!

Of course, time and circumstances change and so do movies. Suddenly, around 1982, the first birth year of the Millennial generation, movies' portrayal of children became more positive. No more kid shysters like Tatum O'Neal in *Paper Moon*. We had *Raising Arizona*, and the *Look Who's Talking* and *Three Men and a Baby* series where children were viewed as little darlings—sort of latter day Shirley Temples! There would be no more teen street walkers like Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver*. Instead, we had an adult Jodie Foster protecting her genius son *Little Man Tate*! We now had *Parenthood*, *Baby Boom*, *For Keeps*, and *She's Having a Baby*! We began to own more responsibility for the effects parents have on our kids. As the first wave of Millennials was being born starting in 1982, the portrayal of children in movies started to change.

It strikes me as more than coincidental that Stephen Spielberg's wonderful blockbuster movie *E.T.* came out in the first birth year of Millennials, 1982. Here was precious little Drew Barrymore playing young Gertie to an Extra Terrestrial nearly her size. *ET* was prophetic. In having a child-friendly Extra Terrestrial (remember, it's the adults who play the bad guys) it was as if the movies themselves had been invaded with the good

sense to stop picking on kids and see them for what they are: innocents waiting the chance to just be kids! Later attempts to keep the evil child genre going fell on their faces!

But are Millennials really all that different from GenXers? I had one of each and, aside from being a boy and a girl; one more outgoing than the other, they really aren't all that different. Yet, no one ever put a sign on their van's back window "**Baby On Board**" for GenXers. It's as if our society in the 4 generations from G.I's to GenXer's has determined it's time for some new G.I's to emerge—hopefully without a war to go with it.

If we don't believe this, consider the name of the documentary: *Waiting For Superman*. This groundbreaking feature "tells it like it is" regarding the slide in public education in America. It makes clear that several U.S. presidents on both sides of the aisle failed to live up to their self-proclaimed title "The Educational President." Student performance has only worsened in recent decades, starting with us Boomers! In fact, every statistical measure has gotten worse since we Boomers came on the scene! While *Waiting For Superman* is ostensibly about the wish for some savior to rescue our nation's schools, its title can be read to mean we really, hope this new generation will be the superheroes we yearn for to turn this ungodly mess around!

This is the pressure Millennials live under. Will they be the church's and America's next heroes, next Joshuas, who will lead the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land? Will they be the next Great Generation?

Despite nearly 60 years separating the youngest G.I. from the oldest Millennial, the two generations share some curious characteristics. Both possess remarkable optimism. In interview-after-interview in Brokaw's *Greatest Generation* you hear G.I. men and women glow with optimism in spite of growing up during the Depression and WWII. It's like they're all the New York Yankee Iron Man, Lou Gehrig, who, despite dying of the disease bearing his name, still announces, "I'm the luckiest man in the world." Millennials often show this same optimism: "Are we cynical?" asks 17 year old Lorena Cortese. "No, why should we be?" Or as 17 year old Michael Eliason says, "The fundamental difference between Boomers/Xers and us Millennials is that older generations resist the idea that things can get better. They see the problems, get depressed, complain about them, and raise us to get by in this 'harsh world.' And all the while, they refuse to take an extra leap of optimism necessary to change things."¹ I felt this difference a few years ago attending the Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington on Climate Change. My thinking was: if you can make any little difference at all, you've done something! But Millennials there talked

like they could change the world! As a cynical Boomer I found these “kids” optimism a bit laughable. Yet, I had to admit I also found it refreshing. In this as well as in their Millennial talk of “teamwork” they are similar to the more busy-bee G.I.’s who really did change the world in winning WWII!

Some years ago *Newsweek* reported, “As a group, today’s teens are infused with an optimism not seen among kids in decades. (It doesn’t hurt to have grown up in a time of relative peace and the longest economic expansion in U.S. history.)”² Some Millennial optimism occurs from growing up in times that tested no one’s soul like the 30’s, 40’s and 60’s did.

The one tragedy which touched this generation deeply was Columbine. And yet, terrible as it was, Millennials’ have not been exposed to the global nightmares of a Depression, World War, or Cold War with its constant front-burner threat of total global nuclear annihilation.

An illustration of the differences in generational exposure is the Beloit Mindset list of things each entering college Freshman Class knows or doesn’t know by sheer accident of the date of their birth; like this most recent Freshman Class of 2014, born in 1992.

1. Few in the class know how to write in cursive.
2. Email is just too slow, and they seldom if ever use snail mail.
3. With increasing numbers of ramps, Braille signs, and handicapped parking spaces, the world has always been trying harder to accommodate people with disabilities.
4. Entering college this fall in a country where a quarter of young

people under 18 have at least one immigrant parent, they aren't afraid of immigration...unless it involves "real" aliens from another planet.

5. John McEnroe has never played professional tennis.
6. Clint Eastwood is better known as a sensitive director than as Dirty Harry.
7. Korean cars have always been a staple on American highways.
8. Computers have never lacked a CD-Rom drive.
9. Czechoslovakia has never existed.
10. There have always been HIV positive athletes in the Olympics.
11. American companies have always done business in Vietnam.
12. The nation has never approved the job Congress is doing.
13. The Post Office has always been going broke.
14. Honda has always been a major competitor on Memorial Day at Indianapolis

This list is amazing. It underscores how we can all count on change.

So, does this information give us any clues as to whether Millennials are the church's and America's next great generation?

In all fairness, someone might have asked the same question of the G.I.'s at a similar stage in their life. Their greatness was unknown until historical events challenged them. The singular challenge they met was World War II, when, as a generation they Aced the test. Thankfully, even with the Great Recession, no such event has challenged Millennials in the same way. Besides, Millennials are still very young. Neither they nor we know what they would do if such a crisis unfolded.

But we do know this: If Millennials were ever to be drafted for a global war which involved technology, they'd probably win. Using

computers and cell phones is second nature to them. “*Growing Up Digital* author Don Tapscott describes their ‘very strong sense of the common good and of collective social and civic responsibility’.”³ “When undergraduate students were asked to name the characteristic that best described their generation, the 2 most popular answers were ‘open-minded and independent’.”⁴ To wit: equal rights for homosexuals. This may in part be due to what my own Millennial son Peter, a leader in the Gay-Straight Alliance at his *alma mater* Ripon College, says about the difference technology makes in shrinking our world. He says, through the use of his computer and smart phone he can be in touch with nearly anyone in the world in a few seconds and learn just about anything he wants to know. He adds, “Communication isn’t the same thing as connecting.” He means that just because people can communicate doesn’t mean they actually connect.⁵

Millennials do not think in a modern, linear way. Instead, Millennials are post-modern thinkers: Their thinking is more circuitous. For example, they can hold 2 apparently contradictory statements together as true!

“When Millennials are asked to identify ‘the major causes’ of America’s problems their 7 most popular answers all pertain to what they perceive as an excess of adult individualism:” Things like selfishness, people who don’t respect authorities, wrongdoing by politicians, lack of

parental discipline, too much emphasis on money and materialism, lack of morality/ethics in society.”⁶

The irony in their answers is that these are the very qualities others often identify in Millennials. GenXer and Ph.D. Jean Twenge notes a troubling narcissism among her peers and Millennials in her book *Generation ME*. In Greek mythology Narcissus was a hunter who was renowned for his beauty. He was exceptionally proud, in that he disdained those who loved him. Nemesis saw this and attracted Narcissus to a pool where he saw his own reflection in the waters and fell in love with it, not realizing it was merely an image. Unable to leave the beauty of his reflection, Narcissus died.⁷ He was essentially paralyzed, and by some accounts eventually became self-loathing because of his conceit.

Twenge indicates that parents and schools created a cult of self-esteem, in which children were too-quickly applauded for the most menial accomplishments, giving them a false sense of self. The result is a generation which is sometimes referred to as “The Entitlement Generation,” because of the widespread feeling they deserve every good thing they get. At its worst, writes Twenge, “Narcissistic personalities arise wherever people feel no accountability for their mistakes but blame others whenever anything goes wrong.”⁸ Despite one Millennial quoting the now famous line

“There is no ‘I’ in ‘Team’,” Twenge makes a strong case for Millennial narcissism and entitlement: a detriment to forming strong marriages, communities and relationships of any kind. This adds fuel to the debate of whether Millennials will be the next great generation who rebuilds institutions at a time institutions, including the church, are at their weakest in more than 40 years. They are certainly smart enough, numerous enough, and possessed with a strong sense of moral and ethical responsibility.

This I think we Christians must believe. As the Book of Acts says,

“In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”

The question is: Will God provide the Millennials to be that witness or will it be someone else? In faith we can only wait and see. As the Risen Jesus told doubting Thomas: *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”* If Millennials step up to the plate in the ever revolving crises similar generations have faced in the past, they may become the next great generation. They may become our new Joshuas who lead the church and America into the Promised Land!

¹William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising*, NY: Vintage Press, pp. 66-67

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

⁴Jean Twenge, *Generation Me*, NY: Free Press, 2006, p. 24.

⁵Phone Conversation about Millennials on Tuesday, May 31, 2011

⁶Strauss & Howe, *Millennials Rising*, cf. above, p# unknown

⁷The Myth of Narcissus, *Wikipedia*.

⁸Twenge, *Ibid*. Twenge carries this theme throughout her book. Cf. also noted historian Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism*, NY: Norton, 1979, which deals primarily with this phenomenon among Boomers.