

**Choose This Day; Who will you Worship and Serve?  
October 4, 2009**

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-25 (Ord 27B/World Communion)  
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**Scripture: Joshua 24:1-25**

24Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. 3Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; 4and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. 5Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. 6When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. 7When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. 8Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. 9Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, 10but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. 11When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. 12I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. 13I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. 14"Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

15Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." 16Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18and 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."

## **Proclamation of The Word**

I am usually suspicious of people who make faith a simple 3 step process. The three steps to salvation....makes it sound like a faith recipe: add water, mix, and bake.

...sounds more Betty Crocker than Almighty God, to me.

...feels more "How to win friends and influence people" than the tricky dance of relationship with a living God.

...Sounds too self-help and not enough God-led to me.

I am suspicious of simple steps of faith because the Bible witnesses to me of a complex faith. People hear a call. People fall away. God sends a flood. People recommit. God sends kings and prophets. Bad things happen like exile and oppression. The people are reminded of God's compassion and tender love for them. And just when they institutionalize faith and nail everything down, God sends Jesus in the form of a baby who grows up to serve a kingdom that no one has imagined yet. God sends Jesus to reveal a new covenant, a new relationship with humanity. There is nothing simple about that! There is never anything simple about a relationship. That is what we get with our covenanting God- a relationship not a recipe.

Today's Scripture in Joshua is a covenant renewal. Joshua helps them remember their story- their history as a people. He asks them to recommit to the God who has been faithful throughout time. And with Joshua he is asking for a clear decision. He says choose this day whom you will serve. Where do you put your buckets down? Are you with God or not? No bones about it. If Joshua were here today, think how our commitment ceremonies would go. If Joshua were asking the questions in Baptism instead of saying,

Michael and Helen, do you desire that Harrison be baptized?

Joshua might say are you going to wake that child up and dress him for Sunday School each Sunday for the next 18 years, even when you'd rather sleep in? Will you talk about faith at the dinner table- that is if you can squeeze in dinner among the many activities children will have? Will you come as a family to worship even when that child turns into a sassy, tattooed teenager who stayed up all night texting? Here's your chance, choose!

Joshua might ask us in the congregation. Do you promise to raise this child including teaching that child in Sunday school, making room for children in your worship even if it makes you uncomfortable or annoyed? Do you promise to support this church financially so that children's ministry might happen in this building with the support of staff and provide materials for that ministry? Choose this day!

Joshua is straightforward, direct, and no bones about it.

But before Joshua asks the Israelites to make a choice to serve God, he reminds them of their story. Joshua reminds them that God has chosen them and has been faithful to them. He tells of how God has brought them out of slavery, and blessed them on their journey. God has set them free by making a way out of no way when the waters of the Red Sea were parted. After they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God walked with them through the waters of the Jordan and gave them a place to establish a livelihood. They have been sustained by the hand of God's providence. God has acted faithfully through their lives and through the lives of their ancestors. Joshua gives them the long view to look back and see that God had made promises to be faithful and here they were going to set their buckets down and claim their inheritance. Everything had been given to them. Even the land, the towns, the food on their table was a gift. God is the subject, the actor if you will. Listen to all the verbs...*I gave, I brought you up, I led you....*

In verses 13-14 in the NIV Bible reads,

<sup>13</sup> *So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'*

**Here is our response:**

<sup>14</sup> *"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD*

Now we may claim to be owners of all we have, but in truth what we have whether it be an inheritance of love, of education, of land, or of faith, it was passed down to us. Let me give an example, I received a college education at Presbyterian College because in faith, that college was started by the churches of South Carolina, many faithful churches and individuals had built that college, preserved it through the years. The Belks, Baileys, and Smythes built the dorms students lived in. Others built the classrooms I studied in. Yes, my mother paid a portion of tuition. But still others like Dr. Joe Gettys established a scholarship in honor of his wife, Mary Lou, who had been a Christian Educator for her whole life. Their gift me helped me receive an education. I was given an inheritance of a place I did not build, and I ate the fruit of plants I did not grow. But God through the power of the Holy Spirit did establish that institution with the help of many faculty, administrators, women's circles, and churches. I was the beneficiary of a gift. That is how grace works. Yes, I had to do my part, but before I was born that land was tilled and the earth was bearing fruit of which I got to be a part.

Joshua is reminding the Israelites that once they were no people and now they are God's people. Yahweh God had been unfolding their inheritance of grace that God had promised to Abraham and all their ancestors. Every step of the journey, looking back, the people of God can see how God is working out their salvation, their inheritance. Joshua says, "Okay folks, now its decision time, are you going to follow the Lord?" If so, here are the steps you will follow according to verse 14.

Step One: fear the LORD (worship God)  
Step Two: serve the LORD  
Step Three: throw away the other gods

Then Joshua says, "Choose this day who you will serve." You have a choice to make. In gratitude for all God has done, are you willing to worship God with your lifestyle and choices. Let's remember that worship of God especially in the Old Testament is about serving God...caring for the widow, the orphan, welcoming the stranger, treating your employees fairly, tithing your resources, living by the guidance of the law.

Joshua says the final step is to throw away other gods. Interesting, I would think that would be step one. Would one not throw away other gods, the things that we trust and love more than God before we would worship and serve the Lord? I am fascinated by that order. I was reading along, cruising through, and eerrkkk, I had to slam on the brakes and stop here. Worship the Lord, serve the Lord, and then throw away your other gods.

But remember this is not a Recipe God we worship, this is a Relationship God we worship. God makes a covenant promise to us, and we respond in turn. Faith is committing this day and each day to trust God and to serve

When we choose to follow God, we begin to clean out the closet and throw away those other gods we thought we needed.

God says look back, haven't I been with you all along the journey? I am with you and will watch over you. Throw away the god of fear. Throw away the god of greed. Throw away the god of busyness. Be satisfied in me. Trust me with your life, your child, your loved one you are fretting over. Trust me with your job situation. Trust me in a world that wants to make war, that I can make a way out of no way.

Joshua knows it will be hard. It will be a commitment they will live into- one they will choose this day and have to choose each day.

The whole passage is a worship service: Telling the story, asking for a response and commitment, and then a tangible sign of their covenant. To mark their renewed commitment as a community, all the tribes have a commitment ceremony. They place a stone under the oaks where their ancestors Abraham and Jacob have worshipped and lived. They make a memorial- a tangible sign of their commitment at Shechem.

And here in this place on this particular day, God gives us tangible signs of grace in this Sanctuary of Stone built on land that none of us owned, built by ancestors in the faith and perhaps some of you to be a blessing to this congregation, this community and this world.

This sanctuary of stone is a visible sign of God's grace in which we pray over water, claim God's love for his children, make promises and commit a child and ourselves to that covenant of grace.

This Sanctuary of Stone is where we return to God what belongs to God whether it is our praise, our money, or even our loved ones when they are called home.

This Sanctuary of Stone is where we are reminded of our history. We receive grace upon grace in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ through the power of God's Holy Spirit as we receive bread and cup, the blessing of brokenness shared and grace multiplied. It is here where we confess the sins of the world and seek to turn again to God and live as disciples.

It is in this Sanctuary of Stone that we pray for the world and our part in it. Our ancestors placed a stone in that place to remind them of all God had done and promised to do. We live in houses we did not build and eat from vines we did not plant. All of life is a gift. Salvation is a gift- a gift, like the bread and cup, grace that is meant to be shared.

Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise of salvation. He is the new covenant sealed in his blood as we remember at the Communion table. And in 1 Peter 2:4-10 we are invited to come to Jesus,

*Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

And we are reminded of our calling. We are people who have received an inheritance of grace, and we are called to share that grace, mercy and peace with all our neighbors as a witness to our relationship with this promise-making, covenanting God.

This is your calling from 1 Peter:

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

*Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy*

God chose us to tell the world a story of salvation.

We come here to remember our story.

There is a whole world out there that needs to hear that story.

So the choice is ours. The time is now. Who will you worship and serve?