

**Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18 (NRSV)**

Then 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. And 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...

"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. Now 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."

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for 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; 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."

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we are, close to the beginning of the new school year. Everyone is excited, all the kids are posting their schedules on Facebook to see who else is in their classes. Practices have started, everyone is out buying school clothes and school supplies. Around here, we're getting ready for confirmation and Sunday school. And we're getting ready to roll out a new logo with new stationery and a new layout for the monthly newsletter, a newly reorganized ministry structure. The North Wing is getting close to done and we can hardly wait to move in.

The Old Testament reading from Joshua is so very appropriate for this community right now. It's a dramatic reading. Joshua has come to the end of his long life of service. It was Joshua, after all, who led the people of God into the promised land, who picked up where Moses left off and who now asks the people of God to "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." These are wonderful, stirring words, "choose this day whom you will serve ... as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

The people answer "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods." We would never forsake this God who brought us out of slavery and protected us in the wilderness, who gave us this land. "We also will serve the Lord." The reading goes on beyond what is in the bulletin. Joshua tells the people, "You cannot serve the Lord; he is a holy God, he is a jealous God ... If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." And the people say again, "No, we will serve the Lord." And Joshua tells them "You will be witnesses against yourselves, that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they say, "We are witnesses." And Joshua tells them, "Then put away the foreign gods among you and incline your hearts to the Lord." And the people agree and they put up a big stone as a monument to their covenant that they will serve the Lord. And they all join hands and sing Kumbaya and then serve God faithfully forever. (Pause here)

Of course, that is not the end of the story. The people of God do occupy the land but after a while begin to serve other gods. And they ask for a king so that they can be like other nations and when they get kings, they begin wars of conquest and build big palaces and oppress the strangers and the foreigners among them and pretty soon it's hard to tell the chosen people of God from the people who aren't the chosen people of God.

This is a wonderful story to tell at the beginning of the school year, at a time when we as a church are beginning a new chapter of our life together. The start of the school year is a time that we make choices and commitments. Everybody promises to do their homework before playing computer games, to go to every class and pay attention and take good notes. Everybody promises to make nutritious lunches and eat dinner together. Everybody goes to Sunday school on Rally Day. Everybody promises to go to every confirmation class. Everyone says they're going to turn over a new leaf and go to worship every week. And everyone is telling the truth.

But then things happen. The teachers get real boring and the homework is too hard and I can't do it because I missed the class where they covered that material. And it turns out that the meeting at work went too long and Johnny has to go to practice so we can't eat together and the soccer team schedules away games on Sunday so I have to miss confirmation for the next couple months. And all of our good resolutions and promises go into the tank.

You see, Joshua was partly right. He was right when he told the people, "You can't serve the Lord. He is a holy God, a jealous God. He's not going to put up with you forgetting about him or putting him second, or saying, 'Hey, God, hold onto that thought while I text my friend or buy this car or gossip about my neighbor. I'll be right back.'"

I think that of all the commandments, the one that we break most frequently is the first one: "I am the Lord your God, you will have no other gods before me." We don't generally steal, we don't generally kill people or commit adultery, exactly. But we do follow other gods. They may be the gods of Aeropostale or Hollister or Old Navy who demand that we carry their names on our chests. They may be the gods of "Spend money you don't have to buy things you don't need." They may be the gods of busy-ness or bad priorities, chasing video games and food that doesn't feed us rather than the bread of life.

Or they may be the worst of all: the gods of “I just can’t care anymore about all these people who need my help, who want my money, who ask for my time. I’m looking out for number one.” That is the god I talked about a couple weeks ago, the god of acedia, the god of “I just don’t care anymore.” The environment, poverty, world hunger, seniors without family, children without hope, all these causes, I can’t care about all of them so I won’t care about any.

You see, like the people of God in Joshua, we are witnesses against ourselves. Despite our best intentions, our firmest resolutions, our most sincere promises, we keep falling short. I heard about this bumper sticker, “I wish I were the person my dog thinks I am.” Well, I think all of us wish we were better than we are. That we were more constant, more faithful, kinder, more patient.

Every time we say the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty,” every time we say the Lord’s prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” we are witnesses. But every time we don’t act on those beliefs, we are witnessing against ourselves.

So what can we do? Well, one thing is to “choose this day, whom we will serve.” Maybe not for all days, but for *this* day. For me, sometimes that means going to visit one of our senior members and bring him or her communion. For you it might be washing altar linens, or mowing the lawn at church or writing someone an encouraging note or putting aside a couple of dollars for a good cause. Maybe it’s visiting someone as a Stephen’s Minister or practicing or playing for the Sing and Rejoice band or working for the North Wing or going to another committee meeting. Maybe it is coming to worship. “Choose whom you will serve *this* day” and then do a little something to prove that you did. “Choose whom you will serve *this* day,” and then tomorrow, choose for that day, and then the next and the next. And each day, do a little something to prove to yourself whom you serve.

You see, Joshua was partly right – we can’t choose to serve the Lord once and for all. But in another respect, Joshua was wrong. He

told the Israelites that if they turned away from the Lord that the Lord would turn and do them harm and consume them. Now, God would be right to do that, God would be justified. But God doesn't do that. God gives us a new day, and a new chance to choose whom we will serve.

Choose whom you will serve *this* day. Every day. And then do a little something to prove to yourself the God you chose to serve.

Amen.