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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ Choose This Day

The Rev. Dr. Jim Bennett ~ November 6, 2011

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

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. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

“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.”

But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 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 said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and

trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

On a hot, humid July afternoon, a young law student was returning to school after a visit to his parents. As he walked a country road, a thunderstorm bore down on him and a bolt of lightning knocked him to the ground. Struggling to get up, the man swore to St. Anne that if he survived he would join a monastery. He survived, and two weeks later he was taking his monastic vows. The year was 1505, and the man was Martin Luther.

Why are you here? What choices have you made that led to you this place at this time? For some, it may be rooted in a big decision—a decision to accept God's grace—whether that decision came two days ago or two decades ago. For others of us, though, much like Martin Luther, the most relevant choices may be more contingent. Probably not lightening, but maybe the time change made it easier to get up this morning, or maybe a spouse, friend, or parent has brought us here, either by invitation or as part of a negotiation.

But here we are, by big obvious choices, or little ones that maybe we didn't even realize we were making, here we are choosing to serve and worship God at this moment.

Our reading from Joshua captures what it means to chose whom we will serve. This passage comes from Joshua's farewell speech to the Israelites, just before he dies at 110 years of age. Inheriting from Moses leadership of the Israelites, Joshua has led them from a people wandering in the desert, across the Jordan River and, with God's help, taken possession of the land that God had long ago promised Abraham. Joshua recounts this history of God's faithfulness: how God called a people who did not know God, made promises through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; how God then rescued his people out of slavery in Egypt, defeated Pharaoh's Army and guided the Hebrews through the wilderness, and how God had led them to conquer the peoples living in Canaan, from crumbling the walls of Jericho to defeating the gods of the inhabitants. As the people consider the ways that God has been faithful to God's promises, Joshua calls upon them to declare their allegiance: "choose this day whom you will serve."

The people gathered before Joshua respond with a vigorous "we choose the Lord God." And it's significant to note how they respond: they don't just say we choose God over other gods.

They also explain why. This choice is no act of blind faith. The reason we will not forsake the Lord, they explain, is because they can see what God has already done. Like Joshua, they remember God's action on their behalf. This is no impulsive choice or rash decision. Other gods may do things here and there, when asked, but our God is the one who has kept his promises from the start. We choose, the people say, the God who delivered us from evil and brought us into the land of Milk and Honey. We choose the God who has not only been with us, but has led every step.

We choose the God who has already chosen us!

That recognition is all the difference: when we "choose this day" to serve the Lord our God, we are not convincing or coercing God to do something in return. When we join Joshua and his household in the decision to serve the Lord, we are affirming the choice that God has already made: we are recognizing that God has already chosen us! For Joshua and the Israelites, they saw God's choice for them evident in the promises God had made and kept to their ancestors, and in the story of their exodus and deliverance into the Promised Land.

To "choose this day" is to call us into the same consideration. We, too, see God's choice for us evident in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For us, rival gods are not such much other deities than they are those things that distract our service, our loyalty, and our fundamental orientation from God. Those gods may be tempting, but like the Israelites before Joshua, we must stop and ask: have any of those gods chosen us? The false gods who tempt us may ease a particular pain or coddle a creature comfort, but the Lord God we serve not only rejoices in our triumphs but also, in his own sacrifice, comes alongside us in our deepest moments of pain and suffering. We choose, not out of blind hope of what might happen, but in the firm confidence of what has already been done in Christ Jesus!

And so, when we say yes to the God who chooses us we do not make that choice in a vacuum. In that yes, we become grafted onto the history that is the reason and evidence for our choice. Not just the history of the Israelites, but also the generations who have also chosen to serve God and in doing so have passed along the faithful Christian witness that gives us the courage and the confidence to "choose today."

Last Tuesday, Nov. 1, was "All Saints Day"—the day on the liturgical calendar set aside remember all those who have died in the faith, a day to remember how their lives add to that

litany that Joshua recounts, of God's faithfulness that is evident in the lives of those who have chosen to serve God. All Saints Day is an important reminder that while the call to "choose today" is rooted first and foremost in God's choice for us, it also very much made possible and strengthened by the examples of those who have gone before us.

And the strength to "choose this day" not only reaches back to those who have gone before, but reaches out to the community around us now. Joshua did not call individual Israelites to come visit him one by one, nor did he go out to them separately and ask for their decision. And when Joshua had the Israelites gathered before him, he did not ask them to cast a secret ballot on their way home. No, he gathered them together, and asked them to make their choice out-loud, in front of one another, so that they would be witnesses to each other's decision. This is not a decision to be made quietly, in the secrecy of our own hearts or homes. To choose this day to serve the God who chooses us is to declare with vigor and enthusiasm to whom our loyalty belongs. In community we find the strength and support to sustain our choice, especially in those times when it's tough to remain faithful to the all or nothing decision that Joshua describes.

Which brings us back to Martin Luther. Sixteen years after his impulsive decision to enter a monastery, Martin Luther stood before a tribunal that insisted he recant his protests against abuses in the Church. This time, Luther's response was neither rash nor solitary, and the consequences would be far-reaching. Luther's writings were laid out before him and he was asked first, whether they were his, and second, if he stood by them. He answered the first question immediately: yes, he had written all that was before him. As for the second question, he asked for a day to think about his answer. During that day he prayed, and he consulted with friends. When Luther returned to the tribunal he announced:

I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, . . . Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me

The faith that we proclaim, the choice that we make, is one that calls us into community—for the journey of faith to which God calls us and on which God leads us is not one that we take alone, just as the journey out of Egypt and into the Promised Land was one that the Israelites took together. That is why, for example, we always celebrate our sacraments in worship, with our faith community. At baptism, we make promises for ourselves or our children

in front of others so that they may know the choice we have made. We declare our choices in worship so the community of faith will support and nurture, and at times hold us accountable, to those baptismal promises.

And the same for communion. As we do today, we eat the bread and drink the cup as a community of faith, because our decision to say "yes" to God choosing us in Christ is one that calls us into the community with whom we share this meal.

So I invite you to choose this day. Whether you are choosing for the first time, or confirming choices that you have made throughout your life, choose this day to revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Choose this day to join with those who have gone before and with those who surround you. Choose this day to serve the God who has already chosen you. Amen.