

“Decision Time”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts

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Texts: Joshua 24:1-3 a, 14-25

^{24:1} 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. ² And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ^{3a} Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

¹⁴ “Now therefore revere YHWH, and serve [the Holy One] in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve YHWH. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve YHWH, 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 YHWH.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake YHWH to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is YHWH 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. [the Holy One] protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and YHWH drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve YHWH, for [the Holy One] is our God.”

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve YHWH, for [the Almighty] is a holy God. [The Holy One] is a jealous God; [the Holy One] will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake YHWH and serve foreign gods, then [the Holy One] will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.”

²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve YHWH!”

²² Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen YHWH, to serve [YHWH only].”

And they said, “We are witnesses.”

²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to YHWH, the God of Israel.”

²⁴ The people said to Joshua, “YHWH our God we will serve, and [the Holy One] we will obey.”

²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

1

One week ago this morning in Sutherland Springs, Texas, a man with an assault rifle fired into a church at worship, killing at least 26 persons. A few days before a man armed with a rented truck drove down a bike path in New York City, killing eight. Not long before: Las Vegas; Orlando; San Bernardino; Newtown; Aurora.

We are more in the wilderness than in the promised land. So it was with our ancestors at the time of today's story: continuing to bear wildness; searching for a way toward the promise of better days.

Picture the scene: a great council; a gathering of the decision makers; a meeting of the tribes — even those among whom there may be conflict; a momentary setting aside of all differences because the cause is great.

Joshua had the authority to call them all together. This was the man who had been tapped by Moses, Israel's greatest prophet, to lead the people. Joshua, the personally-selected successor to the one who led the people out of Egypt and all the way to the promised land. You know it's a big moment when such a singular leader had called together all the powerful people.

Joshua spoke with all the gravitas of God's chosen servant. He spoke in God's name, with God's message, to all of them. "You remember what I did. I found your ancestor Abraham, the one whom you still think of as father of the people. I found him when he still followed lesser gods! I led him to the promised land, the land where you now stand."

It was a formal kind of speech. Deliberate. Careful. If the people listened attentively, they could tell something substantial was coming.

"Now it is time," said Joshua. "Now it is time for you to choose."

2

But wait a minute. Why would they have to choose? Joshua is speaking to people who had been born in the wilderness, whose whole life was about following Moses through great hardship toward the promise of a new home. Did they not already belong to God? Had they not chosen already, for God?

Most of us know how this goes. We are baptized in church, and often our children as well, in an ancient ceremony with great new hope. We learn the stories of faith. We are loved by the community. But not everyone keeps coming back. I don't know what the figures are. One out of four, maybe? One out of six, seven, ten? Not everyone keeps the baptismal promises.

On the edge of the Promised Land, the people remembered what God had done: liberated them from oppressive slavery. Brought them to a new home. The people said, Yes, of course, we will follow God!

But Joshua said, You can't.

If you say you're going to follow and then forget your commitment when God's path gets difficult, or confusing, or hard to find, or when you simply get distracted by the next shiny thing, the next diet, the next internet sensation, the next viral video, the next self-help book that makes sense of everything — if you forget your commitment to God, you're in trouble. God is knowable only if you go all in. Nothing held in reserve. Otherwise God is a hobby, an afterthought.

We will remember! said the people.

Alright then, replied Joshua. You said it. Your words. No going back. You are witnesses against yourselves.

3

Maybe one of the better reasons for reading Bible stories and hearing Bible stories and studying Bible stories is to remember not what God promised but what we have promised. We remember we promised to find security and safety in God alone. Not in armies, nor in guns, nor in borders, nor in tribes. Our safety is the living God.

In baptism we promised to follow Jesus, not other gods. The babies we baptize don't know just how huge a promise that is — how many gods are competing for our allegiance and attention. We barely know it, as adults.

Remember your commitment, said Joshua. You are witnesses against yourselves.

If you say you are committed and then relax, lose focus, your experience of God will become thin, small. God will become just one more duty among many duties. Some days you won't even think about your relationship with God.

You can't follow God! said Joshua. You will forget. You will get distracted!

No, we can do this, said the people!

A youth minister wrote to the youngsters of the church about a Muslim, who in praying five times each day, bowing before God, had developed a prayer callous. From all the days and years of gently touching his head to the ground in awe and love for God, a callous had formed on his forehead. The minister wondered, could we develop prayer callouses of our own? Could we pray five times a day? In the morning, thank God for breath and life and one more day to love God's creation. At each meal, thank God for providing sustenance for body and soul. At the end of the day, thank God for bringing us back to a time of rest.

All of this might take a whopping five minutes out of your day: could you manage it?

Or do we get distracted? And forget what our first commitment is, before food, before family: follow God.

4

Which is just another way of asking, will you give hospitality to God?

Will you pray in the morning, with words of recognition for the One-Who-Made-You?

Could you dance for God, the One-Who-Set-Us-Free, the way Miriam did in joy when God brought the people safely through the Red Sea?

Will you listen for God, the One-Who-Is-Calling-You, the way the boy Samuel listened while serving old Eli, when God spoke during the night?

Would you speak for God, the One-Whose-Essence-Is-Life-Becoming-Whole-and-Just, the way countless prophets have done, remembering that vengeance and violence and greed always break God's heart, remembering that forgiveness and generosity always gladden God's heart?

Will you throw a party, knowing that any one of your guests might be Jesus himself, showing up wherever brotherly and sisterly love is shared?

Or maybe those things are too hard. Or maybe you're over-committed. To other gods.

Maybe you can't follow God, Joshua said. I don't know. Will *you* follow God?

Will you put God's ways of wholeness, harmony, justice, and joy first, before all other commitments? Will *you* follow God?

I can't say I'm convinced by your response.

5

Joshua got the people to say it not once, not twice, but three times. Get it stamped in memory so we never forget. So with a wave of my arm I am going to momentarily change you out of your cautiousness into God's people about to enter into the promised land with no assurances other than the Living Word of God. If you are committed to the God of mercy and liberation and new life — if you are committed to the God we know in compassion and generosity and hospitality — say it after me:

We will follow the One-Who-Made-Us! *We will follow the One-Who-Made-Us!*

We will serve the One-Who-Set-Us-Free!

We will!

We will!

We will!

I'm thinking you were just practicing your New England reserve. Let's go for boldness:

We will listen for the One-Who-Is-Calling-Us!

We will speak for the One-Whose-Essence-Is-Life!

We will!

We will!

We will!

Now with a wave of my arm I return you to your selves: a Christ-centered community in the non-demonstrative northeast. But whoever and wherever you are, remember what you have said.

Your words. Your promise. Your God.