

"Remember to Choose." Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25; Ps. 78:1-7; Matt. 25:1-13
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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We've just come through a long, long, long election season. When last Tuesday finally arrived all that remained was for us to make a decision. After getting all the information and considering it carefully and weighing all the other intangibles, we finally had to cast our votes.

Along the way there were many telling us to remember to vote. They were on our phones, our TV's, in our mail and emails. They blogged and facebooked us. How could we forget to vote? Who would let us forget?

And then, it all came down to a moment of decision and, once we had cast our votes, that was it. We couldn't get them back, even if we wanted to.

Today's text from the story of Joshua recounts another time of decision. The people had traveled far from their slavery in Egypt. They had sojourned in the Sinai Wilderness under Moses' leadership. They had begun conquering Canaan under Joshua who had led them after Moses' death. The promise of the Promised Land was becoming a reality.

Near the end of his life Joshua called everyone together at a place called Shechem, about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. It was an important place; religiously, politically and historically. This was where Abram had camped centuries earlier and encountered God. Abram built an altar here and called on the name of the Lord.

Abraham's grandson Jacob had bought land here. Now the people with Joshua had carried the bones of Jacob's son, Joseph, all the way from Egypt to Canaan. His bones would be buried here at Shechem.

So it was an important and meaningful place, filled with history and strong echoes of events out of their heritage. It is not accident that Joshua called everyone together at Shechem.

Once they were gathered he proceeded to recount their history and remind them how God had done wonders for them in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, sustaining them through the Sinai with manna and quails, causing their enemies to turn and run, and leading them into the Promised Land.

At the end of his "holy history lesson" Joshua commanded them to choose. "Remember who you are and choose whom you will serve as your God. Will it be the God who went before you as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night? Or will it be the gods of the people you conquered whose gods are worshiped on the high places with green sapling poles and other symbols of fertility or power?"

Joshua simply lays the question before them. They have to choose. He will not do the choosing for them. But, he does know the power of example as he says to them: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

We too have to choose. We will either serve the LORD God or serve our own interests, in this case represented by "other gods." Other gods would have been attractive. They often promised good harvests, fertility, prosperity, favorable weather, and the like.

Other gods offered all the things to make a hard life easier, if only you make the appropriate sacrifices and do the right rituals. Service to

these gods demanded relatively little compared to the demands of the God of Israel.

The God of Israel demanded much more than just proper worship and ritual. The God of Israel demanded justice within the community; concern for the poor, widow, and orphan; hospitality for the stranger; as well as proper religious practice as would befit the worship of the God of heaven and earth.

As the prophet Amos would say years later:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."
(Amos 5:21-24).

At another time, the prophet Micah would give his short list of what choosing to serve God with devotion and dedication means: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Joshua knows that serving *this* God demands more of God's people. He doesn't say it lightly when he says: "Choose this day whom you will serve."

The people responded by saying that they, like Joshua, would also serve the Lord. Now: what preacher wouldn't want that kind of positive response? Isn't this what Joshua had hoped for?

But then a strange thing happened. Joshua said, "No. You cannot serve this God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a jealous God. He

doesn't make room for other deities or make allowances for divided loyalties. This God does not 'play well' with other gods."

What is this all about? Is Joshua trying to test their resolve? Pushing them to make sure? Is he just issuing fair warning? Practicing reverse psychology?

Whatever his motivation might have been, the people reaffirm their choice. They are choosing the God who chose them before the world began.

It is a wonderful moment, a defining moment, a dangerous moment. But they have remembered their history and they have chosen based on their experience and the experience of their ancestors. ///

This is such a moment for us as well. Each and every day is a day of decision, a time of choosing. Whom do we serve? What does it mean to serve the God who has been made known to us in Jesus Christ? How will we answer the exhortation to choose?

What are the personal gods that we have to move out of center stage in order to make room for the Lord in our hearts and in our lives?

If we survey our divided loyalties, our blurred boundaries, our attempts to keep many gods happy and placated, what does it mean for us to answer this call and this invitation?

It means different things to each of us. For some it means a response that is mediated through ordination - the call to service in special ways. For others it means seeing whatever we do as an exercise of our God-given gifts and abilities and remembering the source of all that we are.

For all of us it means making a conscious decision to be different and remembering to choose a narrower path that leads to broader life.

Our life together here at Chapel Lane is one expression of our decision to be different. How we use our resources is another way we live out the decision we have made to be a part of Christ's body, Christ's church.

In a way it seems rather odd that we have a stewardship campaign at all. Haven't we already made the decision and chosen to be gathered into the one body of Christ? Haven't we promised to support the work of Jesus Christ here in this place and in many other places around the world?

Over the past few weeks you have received some information related to your church's budget and the needs that we are trying to address. Hopefully the information has been helpful.

Hopefully remembering our history has been helpful too, in giving us confidence that God will provide, and in calling us to consider just what choosing to serve the Lord means here and now.

Remember who you are: You are a child of God. Remember whose you are: Whether you live or die, you are the Lord's. Recommit yourself to the covenant God has made with you -- through loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Remember. And then choose. "Choose this day whom you will serve".

And to God be the glory now and forever. Amen.