

“The Decision”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 12, 2017

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Joshua 24:1, 14-18

What is the most important task of the church? Some people might say: “being God’s hands and feet for the world,” or “sharing the good news.” Others might say: “teaching children about Jesus,” or “being a welcoming place.”

Each of these is certainly among the most important things the church does. But if you were to ask classical Reformed theologians what the church’s number one task is, the answer would be: “worshipping the Lord.” Written in the 17th century, the Westminster Catechism’s first question and answer essentially is, “Why did God create us? To glorify and enjoy God forever.” In other words, you and I were created for worship.¹

Worship, though, is not an end in itself. We don’t worship just in order to sing, pray, hear and respond to God’s Word. We worship because it allows us to express and deepen our relationship with God. It helps us to remember and reaffirm our decision to love God with all our heart, mind and soul.

For the people of Israel, it was decision time, again. Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, in the same place where, long ago, God had appeared to Abraham and gave the promise of this land. After their covenant was made, Abraham had built an altar there; the first sanctuary to God in the land of promise.

Joshua now gathers the people once again at this same place, so that – at this moment of reaffirming their decision – they are surrounded by physical reminders of God’s promise to their people of Israel throughout the generations. There, they come to worship again; and – led by Joshua – they renew their commitment to this God who has brought them to this place and stands with them always.

Now that the tribes of Israel possess the land of promise, Joshua understands they will be tempted to believe that they no longer need God. Because it is a land of great abundance, it may seduce the Hebrew people into amnesia and to embrace the other gods of Canaan.

For this reason, Joshua urges the people to put away these other gods and serve only the Lord. If that is undesirable to them, he says, then choose a different God. But, speaking on behalf of his own household, Joshua declares: “we will serve the Lord.”

¹ Doug Bratt from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

Serving God means worshipping God alone and not the other gods. Joshua presents this as a genuine choice; not something they are compelled to do. Maybe, for others, this would not be a good thing – the demands of faithfulness, mercy and justice being too great.² Joshua says that he and his household have chosen the covenantal relationship with the God who gave both the land where they live and the commandments they follow. He fully recognizes, though, that other choices are available; other gods and other ways of life.

Joshua receives a positive response from his community. They are ready to make the same choice that Joshua has made. For, they also remember the ways that God has guided, protected and nurtured them in the past; leading them to this land of promise. They, too, desire to affirm their commitment to God and God alone.

This text stands before us today as we, like our ancestors, enter into a “new land,” This new landscape is different from our old, taken-for granted life. We have moved into a new information age with the endless opportunities and challenges that it presents. Our new venue for faith is a changed world of many languages, ethnic groups, and religious (and non-religious) orientations that can be seen either with excitement or suspicion.

It is understandable, then, that Joshua was so up-front with his people. The choices to be made were stark and immediate. Joshua knew that to default on such decisions would not make them go away. Choosing God meant remembering their heritage, but also reaffirming their commitments to mercy and justice; to not only loving God but loving their neighbor as well.³

The same Hebrew word is used to mean both “worship” and “serve.” Therefore, in the promise to worship God, Joshua and the people of Israel were claiming total allegiance. God would figure prominently in everything they would do: in the way they went about their work; in the ways they allotted their time, energy and resources; and in the ways they involved themselves in their community. Their identity as God’s people mattered not only when they were together in worship, but in every aspect of their life; especially now that they had entered into this new land.

As we, the people of Valley Church, enter into a new landscape, we also have been given the opportunity to decide: to reaffirm our identity as God’s people in this place and time. Just as was the case in ancient times, each person must make this choice for themselves; for there are a lot of other gods around us – money and fame, power and popularity among them – and these can be very tempting. Choosing God is not always the easiest way; serving God alone will require that we remember what God has done and where we have been led, in order to perceive where God is active and leading us now.

² Sarah Koenig from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Walter Brueggemann, “Making the God Decision”

Today, we begin that process; a journey of renewal for this church. We will take this first step by telling stories around tables during lunch about what this church means to us. Each of us knows something about this church, and how God has been at work here, but none of us knows the whole story; so it is important for us to share and to listen. From these stories, we will look for the beliefs, values and purposes which undergird them; that which helps to create our unique identity: who we are as a church.

Why focus now on renewal? Maybe, like me, you are wondering what voice the church has in today's world; about how we relate with people of other faiths. Maybe, like many people, you wish there was greater unity, or a clearer purpose. What will the church be like in ten years; or five years? Where are the young people, you might ask, or how can we worry less and have a greater sense of gratitude?

In a few minutes, you will be given more detailed instructions about today's activities. But for now, let us again focus on the most important thing: our worship; on the way we glorify and enjoy God – here and now; and in all places and forever. God has given us our life and all things; God has brought us safely to this place and continues to guide and protect us; God loves each of us wholly and without condition. God has chosen us; now the choice is ours! AMEN.