

# “The Choice”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 14, 2018*

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Psalms 63:1-8

Joshua 24:1-15

Once again, we have skipped over vast portions of the Old Testament story; having left off previously with Moses receiving the Law, the Ten Commandments, soon after the Israelites had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. After leading them on their long Exodus journey, Moses ascends another mountain to see into the promised land of Canaan. But, Moses will not be the one to lead his people into this new land; that task falls upon his successor, Joshua.

While the Bible remembers Moses as a holy deliverer, Joshua – on the other hand – is described as a holy warrior. He leads Israel in what is called the *herem*: a holy war designed to conquer the Canaanites and settle the twelve tribes of Israel into their allotted territories. The initial instructions that Joshua received were to cleanse the promised land of all non-Israelites and thus eliminate not just the humans in their way, but also temptations to worship other gods.

If we were to read the many accounts in Joshua of genocidal warfare that precede this morning’s text, we would be rightfully troubled. They seem to run contrary to so many other biblical texts in which peace, non-violence, loving enemies, and turning the other cheek are proclaimed as God’s ultimate will and purpose for humanity. It is impossible to completely reconcile these ethical concerns. But, we do know that if Joshua’s mandate had been to wipe out the Canaanites, he had failed. We can see that Rahab and her family in Jericho, as well as the Gibeonites, and many other Canaanite tribes were not conquered and thus remained living in the land.

It seems as if God abandoned the original *herem* war plan to eliminate everyone else from Canaan. Instead, God allowed them to continue to live among the Israelites – or, allowed the Israelites to live among the Canaanites. This, we are told, was in order to “test” Israel; God’s design for total conquest – if that really was the original plan – got consigned to the dustbin of history.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Joshua knew what Moses had also known; that the future of God’s people in the land ultimately depends on God’s faithfulness and mercy. They were now in their new home only because God had heard their cry, rescued

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Olsen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

them from slavery, provided for them through the wilderness, and brought them finally into their long-promised home. Therefore, when Joshua recounts the history of their people from Abraham to the present, it isn't a bedtime story or an idle tale; it has a theological purpose: God played a role in who they were, where they were, and all that they had. This, according to Joshua, was a story worth remembering.

The whole history that Joshua, the aging holy warrior, recounts in this final address to the gathered people focuses on what God had done for them; not what they, the Israelites, themselves, had done. It culminates with God saying: "I gave you a land on which you have not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of the vineyards and olive-yards that you did not plant." (v. 13) None of Israel's successes in battle, and none of their failures along the way, are mentioned. Instead, it is a straightforward account of God's faithful presence and powerful action on behalf of the people.<sup>2</sup>

But even though God has finally given Israel "rest" from the enemies that surround her in the land of Canaan, she remains in danger. This is a strange land whose foreign ways will prove to be an attractive temptation. It will be difficult for God's people to live alongside other people who choose to worship other gods. Sometimes, when those other people experience good fortune or success, it will seem like their gods are more powerful or effective. Will they forget the faithfulness of their God and instead place their trust in other gods?

Joshua knows that God keeps promises – including the promise that if Israel chooses not to remain faithful to God, then the land of promise may no longer be theirs. During the process of entering Canaan, the Israelites, led by Joshua, were praised for acknowledging their need for God's power and presence. That's hardly surprising. When we, like the Israelites, are facing some kind of danger, or when we are focused on a difficult task, we recognize our need for God. But, when things are going well, we might begin to assume that we don't need God, or that the other gods that surround us might serve us just as well.<sup>3</sup>

Joshua understands that now that Israel possesses the land of promise – having inherited its houses, vineyards and olive trees – the people will be tempted to assume that they no longer need God. And so, Joshua invited Israel to renew their covenant with the Lord. One of the Bible's central images of the relationship between God and God's people is that of a covenant, which is basically a set of promises. Covenant is founded upon God's promise to be our God. God's people

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Schaaf from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>3</sup> Doug Bratt from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

are then called to respond to God's promise by themselves promising to be God's people; to love and obey the Lord exclusively; to choose to serve God alone.

When we gather for worship, we are reminded of the promises that God has both made and kept: first to the people of Israel and, later, in Jesus Christ. The church, therefore, regularly renews the promises that we, as God's people, have made to God. We promise to care for and nurture those who enter the church through baptism. We promise to build up one another and turn away from anything that might tear each other down. We promise to serve our neighbors, and to welcome strangers, and even to pray for enemies. But, so often, we can busy ourselves making and keeping promises to each other such that we forget the promises – the covenant – we have with God.

People who have healthy relationships, whether in our homes, schools, workplaces, or neighborhoods, spend time with each other; talking and listening to one another. In fact, some relationships are so important that we periodically go away to renew them. Friends plan for a weekend together. Families gather for vacations and reunions. Co-workers go off-site for planning or team-building. Worship can be like that; we recall the story of God's faithfulness; we recount the ways that God has shown power and presence. In worship, we remember the promises God has made to us and we renew our promises to God.

And so, each time that we gather, we are called to recall and renew the promises that we have made and the choices that stand before us:

- Will I choose to live in kindness or will I allow old, lingering scars to taint my responses to those around me?
- Will I choose to keep the door closed or will I respond to the cries I hear in the next room, or on the other end of the phone line, or in my neighborhood and beyond?
- Will I choose to entrust to God and God's purposes a portion of what I have been given or will I hoard it all away in fear?
- Will I choose to work for justice in the world or cower in fear that I might offend?
- Will I choose to begin or end or interrupt my day with prayer or will I try instead to go it alone?<sup>4</sup>

We have before us today one of the central questions of our faith; and it is important that we keep it before us week after week, day after day. For while God has chosen us, we are called to choose how we will live out the joy and

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<sup>4</sup> Janet Hunt from *Dancing with the Word*

responsibility of having been chosen. Shall we live in the hope of the covenant? And, if so, what will it look like? What are the social, political and economic dimensions of those choices? This God, says Joshua, does not compromise; but it faithful and steadfast, committed to justice and always on the side of the weak and the vulnerable.

Living in covenant requires making a choice. All religions are not alike, and not all roads lead to the same destination. Some visions of God – within our Christian faith as well as in other religious traditions – are healthier and more insightful than others. In a pluralistic age, when we now have so many connection points available to people of other faith traditions, we can learn from and incorporate the wisdom of other religions. But, still, we must choose to look to Christ as the lens through which we encounter other faiths and spiritual practices; Christ, who came to us, gave himself for us, and gathers us; as his own re-created body, to love and serve in the way that he taught us.<sup>5</sup>

This passage from Joshua challenges modern temptations to pluralism and relativism. Like the Israelites in Canaan, we live among other gods – not the least of which are the gods of our culture such as materialism and blind nationalism. Sometimes, following the other gods around us seems to offer an easier path. Joshua knew that his people were prone to following these other gods, or at least splitting their devotion among them; and so, he encourages them to put those other gods away and place their complete faith in the God their covenant history.

Each Sunday is like a covenant renewal ceremony: we are given the opportunity to remember who we are and whose we are, where we are and where we are going, and who to trust to take us there. Joshua's confession of faith is what we can also choose and join in together, as we say, "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (v. 15) AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Epperly from *The Adventurous Lectionary*