

“Sincere and Faithful”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 16, 2022

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 78:1-7

Joshua 24:1-15

Introduction

After God gave the Commandments at Mount Sinai, and the people said they would do everything the Lord had spoken, the Israelites went on their way...and soon found that actually doing what they had committed to do was much harder than saying it. As they travelled, learning how to trust God, how to put God’s word into action, how to live as the community God called them to be, the whole generation that had come out of Egypt died, and the new generation grew up in the wilderness. After forty years, God brought the people into the Promised Land, and the book of Joshua tells of various battles and conquests, claiming this violence was done in God’s name. After things had settled down and the people lived at peace among their new neighbors, we hear about Joshua’s gathering of the elders and other leaders of the people. The story is in Joshua chapter 24, beginning with the first verse.

Read Joshua 24:1-15

Not long after I came to Valley – now almost fifteen years ago – I was still unaware of all its history. I knew that, just months before, the church had celebrated its fiftieth anniversary; that it started in the barn; that this property used to be a dairy farm, then became a gambling house. I had seen the old newspaper clippings describing how roulette wheels had been carried out and a pulpit had taken their place.

But, I didn’t know the whole story. Members of our Council of Churches were organizing a pulpit exchange. How convenient it would be, I remarked, if the pastor at Bainbridge Community Church came to preach here, and I would go to preach there. After my suggestion, there was an awkward pause, and then an explanation. I was not aware that Valley had been formed, in 1957, in the wake of a scandal within the Bainbridge Church; one that had caused the congregation to split in two. From their perspective, the founders of Valley were the dissidents and deserters; the ones who – when the going got tough – got going.

When Joshua gathers the leaders and elders of tribes of Israel together at Shechem – after the people had crossed over the Jordan and inhabited the Promised

Land; a land, Joshua reminds them, “on which you had not labored, and towns you had not built” – it was important for them to recall their history. More specifically, it was important to remember how God had protected and guided them throughout their history, in the good times and the bad; how long-ago promises had been fulfilled; and how – now, more than ever – they must commit themselves to serve God.

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel” Joshua begins, before taking them back to before Abraham; to the other side of the Euphrates and to a time when the people served other gods. The history consists of a first-person narrative – from the perspective of God – and the mighty acts God had accomplished from the very beginning through the conquest of the land. It shows that throughout their whole history, it was God’s doing, not the people’s. “I brought you out” (v. 5); “I destroyed them before you; I rescued you” (v. 8); “I sent the hornet ahead of you” (v. 12). The entire speech contains not admonitions, instructions, or warnings; there is no mention of the giving of the Law in its account. None of Israel’s grumblings or failings are mentioned either. It is a re-telling of God’s presence with and action on behalf of the people.¹

The entire book of Joshua – of which this is the final chapter – is the story of the victory of the Israelites over those people who had already been living in the Promised Land – the Amorites, Perizzites, and all the others. It was recorded in its final form many centuries later, after the nation of Israel had been defeated and many of its inhabitants carried off into exile in a foreign land. At the time of its writing, this experiment of living peacefully, alongside other peoples, in the land God had given them, seemed to have failed. The actual history that may or may not lie beneath this story of conquest has been the source of endless contention among scholar for years. But, according to this account, God could neutralize any enemy: whether overwhelming army or foreign prophet; the God of Israel would never abandon the promise or the people.

The question for the people, then, is how they will remember their story and whether the history of God’s mighty acts will be the basis of their identity going forward. “Now,” after all that they have heard and been reminded of, Joshua says, “therefore revere the Lord and serve him with sincerity and faithfulness.” (v. 14) The God who has brought them out of slavery and carried them to this land of promise now asks them to become servants again; of a different kind. “Put away the gods that your ancestors served...and serve the Lord.” (v. 14)

Joshua invites the people of Israel to actively participate in this covenant renewal, saying, “choose this day whom you will serve.” (v. 15) But before giving

¹ Scott Shauf from *WorkingPreacher.com*

them an opportunity to decide, Joshua proclaims, “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (v. 15) At this moment of decision, the people are surrounded by physical reminders of God’s promises – towns they did not build and vineyards they did not plant – and oriented by their distinctive, shared practices of worship, justice, and mercy. The same people who were once slaves in Egypt (or, at least, their ancestors were), who – as servants – planted and built but could never reap the benefits of their labor have now been liberated by God and brought to a land where they can enjoy the fruits of other people’s labor.²

The God of Israel always demands that God’s people practice justice: that their concern is not only for themselves, but for their neighbor as well. Thus, even now, as they enjoy these good fruits, they must continue to ask: who are the poor, the widow, the orphan among them? What stranger can they welcome? What blessings do they have to share?

Joshua understood that words can be cheap, and that obedience is often costly. In asking them to choose whom they will serve – the God of Israel or some other gods – he realizes what was true then which is still true today: everyone places their allegiance somewhere. The people, who now reside in Canaan, in this land the overflows with milk and honey, will be tempted to put their trust in a god that requires less; that will not demand commitment to justice and mercy; that will let them focus on self-sufficiency and gain rather than neighborly concern.

This text stands before us now as we, like the ancients, have entered a new landscape that is very different from what we previously knew. We now live beyond the agricultural-industrial world that existed when Valley was founded sixty-five years ago – when food trucks would get stuck on the muddy hill of a yet-to-be-paved Route 306 and Valley would offer drivers shelter until the road dried up – we live now in an information age with its boundless opportunities and frustrations. We are a more mobile, inter-connected, and hurried people than were our church founders. Our new venue for living out our faith is a changed world of diverse languages, ethnic groups, and religious orientations that some see as threats and rivals. How will we choose to live alongside our neighbors when the divisions in our politics, beliefs, and practices seem so deep? What happens now when homes are inhabited by those who did not build them, and fruits are consumed by those who did not plant them?

In this new venue, contemporary as ancient, we are invited to decide. It might be news to us that decisions can be made. It would be easier, instead, to imagine that we are fated, that the die is already cast. We may then be resigned to despair or

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

cynicism. But the decisions before us: who we are and whom we will serve, are more open – and more demanding – than we often imagine.³

Many know Joshua's concluding statement in today's reading well, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord;" some of us may even have these words memorized or hanging on the walls of their homes. This verse makes good sense standing by itself – as a scriptural excerpt – but it gains even more gravity when seen in its larger context. For, it is important to remember our history; to see how God is at work in our past and our present. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we recall Jesus' words, "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). What, exactly, are we remembering; what stories are we choosing to tell; and whose voices are being represented when we tell them?

We have each been given a choice: whom will we serve? Is it the God who made promises to Abraham and led the people out of bondage in Egypt, who carried them safely to a new land and called them to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with their God? Is it the God who also calls us to love our neighbor; to treat one another with mercy and justice; to serve God with sincerity and faithfulness as we enter into this new and unfamiliar, seemingly divided world?

Or is it a myriad of other gods – or things that function for us as gods – that we might otherwise choose? Joshua does not pressure the people; he does not threaten God's wrath upon them if they choose differently. If he did, what kind of freedom would that be? But Joshua knows that before they choose, they need to remember; they must hear again the story of how God has acted to fulfill the ancient promises. And they need to be reminded that while choosing other gods may be less demanding – and maybe more profitable, personally – they are God's people; called and sent; blessed by God to be a blessing for others.

Over its sixty-five year history, this has been Valley's story as well: people who were called by God to form a community and then sent out to share God's mercy, justice and love; blessed by God in order to be a blessing to others. Our spiritual ancestors here made their choice – to give their allegiance to God – sometimes imperfectly, but in sincerity and faithfulness – and to live out their decision together. At the dawn of a new day, as we enter this new and unfamiliar landscape, let us also make our choice; and may our covenant with God be renewed. Amen.

³ Walter Brueggemann, "Making the God Decision"