

11-19-17 Sermon: “Choose this Day Whom You Will Serve” – Joshua 24

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

Friends, it is a special day in the life of First Presbyterian Church of Taos. Today is Commitment Sunday, when we offer up our financial pledges and dedicate them to God and to God’s work in our church and in our community. And, today we will celebrate the baptisms of Emily Burris, Sonia Burris, Hunter Cisneros – welcoming them into this particular family of faith as we all rededicate ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ. Today is indeed a beautiful, joyful Commitment Sunday!

In this morning’s Old Testament reading, we get to listen in on another Commitment Sunday service, one that took place a long, long time ago. Joshua has led the people of Israel into the Promised Land, where after generations of slavery and wandering they will settle down and seek to live as God’s chosen people. And so, in this moment of transition, Joshua calls all the people together to a worship service where they will renew their commitment to the Lord their God. He asks them a question, the question: “Choose this day – this new day – whom you will serve.”

This was an important question for Joshua’s people. For people living in the ancient world, the question was not, “Do you worship God?” but rather “Which god, or gods, do you worship?” Today, we tend to think of religions as monotheistic – believing in one god; or polytheistic – believing in many gods. But the Hebrew people were a little different; their religion was what scholars call henotheistic. They believed that many gods existed, but they chose to worship only one god. Their neighbors in the Promised Land worshiped other gods, often several gods at once. They worshiped gods called El and Yam, Baal and Asherah...the list goes on. And in this context, the Lord asked the Israelites was to be different, a people set apart. To worship only *one* God, the God who brought them out of Egypt. To commit their entire lives to that God alone.

This henotheistic worldview may sound foreign to us, or it may sound...strangely familiar. Other gods still compete for our attention and loyalty today, don’t they? They gods of money or power; the gods of pleasure or luxury. We may not give them names like Baal or offer sacrifices to them. But surely there *are* many other forces in our world that are competing for our ultimate love, and loyalty, and service. Remember what we heard two weeks ago in the Book of Revelation: to confess that Jesus is Lord is to proclaim that everyone and everything else is not. It is to choose this day to serve Jesus, to proclaim that Christ is the only one to whom we swear ultimate allegiance.

This is what we are doing when we present ourselves and our children to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. This is what we are doing when we place our pledge cards in the offering plate, when we dedicate our time, talents, and treasure to the work of God. We recognize that there are other forces in our world competing for our allegiance. And yet we choose, above them all, to follow Jesus Christ.

Choosing to serve the Lord is not the easy option, that’s for sure. Joshua warns the people, “Be careful what choice you make, for the Lord is holy and jealous. If you choose to follow God and then you go astray, be warned! It will not turn out well for you.”

Of course, we always go astray. In the generations that follow this story, the Hebrew people will, many times, turn away from the Lord and worship other gods. And we as Christians, who call Joshua’s people our spiritual ancestors, will stray from God’s path. We all have sinned and will sin again. We are humans.

But as it turns out, God never turns his back on his people forever. The Israelites worship other gods, and God sends prophets to call them back. And then, in the fullness of time, God sends his own Son – God’s very self – to live among us. And through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God encircles us all with a grace that holds us and sustains us and *will not let us go*. And we come to realize that God’s grace has always held us, and sustained us, from the very day we were born.

That’s the funny thing that happens any time we commit ourselves to God. Whenever we choose God, we tend to find that God has already chosen us.

This is why, as Presbyterians, we baptize babies and children who are not yet old enough to understand what it means to dedicate themselves to God. Because when any of us – adult or child – receives the Sacrament of Baptism, we are not choosing God as much as we are acknowledging that God has already chosen us. We are offering ourselves in gratitude to the God who has called us, and claimed us, and poured out grace abundant upon us in an ever-flowing stream. We choose to serve the God who called us by name long before we ever knew God’s name.

In a way, I think the same thing happens with Joshua and the Israelites. When they come into the Promised Land, they make the choice to serve the Lord. But truth be told, this God they choose to serve is the very God who first called their ancestor Abraham to be the father of a covenant people. The God who walked faithfully with Isaac, and Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons. This is the God who heard the cry of the Israelites in Egypt, and delivered them up out of slavery. The God who led them through the wilderness and now, finally, has brought them into the Promised Land. This is the God who has been faithful to them, whose grace has sustained them from the very beginning. The people of Israel choose, and yet God has already chosen them – chosen *us* – again, and again, and again.

So friends, choose this day whom you will serve. On this Commitment Sunday, there is no shortage of places to spend our money. As you place your pledge cards in the offering plate, choose *this* day whom you will serve.

Emily and Sonia, as you come to receive the Sacrament of Baptism – and Mayra and Andrew, as you present Hunter to receive the Sacrament – remember that there are plenty of other people, forces, and causes in this world to which you could devote your lives. Choose *this* day whom you will serve.

Choosing to follow Jesus is not the path of least resistance. We choose the path of Christian discipleship knowing that we are choosing ‘the road less traveled.’ Knowing that the journey before us is not easy. Knowing that we will always serve God imperfectly.

I encourage you, friends: choose to follow Jesus anyway. For it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that has sustained us, and held us, and brought us here, thus far along the way.

Choose to serve Jesus Christ. For he has already chosen us. Thanks be to God. Amen.