

Joshua 24:1-18

The book of Joshua is narratively and ideologically connected to the book of Exodus with themes of covenant, commandments and salvation. Moses is one of the most celebrated figures in Israel's pre-monarchic history, perhaps because he collaborates with Yahweh to deliver the Israelites to Egypt and is the messenger through whom Yahweh reveals the commandments to the people. However, Yahweh's promise for Israel to possess the land is fulfilled after Yahweh appoints Joshua as Moses' successor.

Joshua was an exceptional warrior and model attendant to Moses. Yahweh commissions Joshua to lead the Israelites in capturing Canaan and annihilating the inhabitants of the land. Once in the land, Joshua reminds the tribes of their covenantal relationship and obligations to Yahweh.

To us, this passage may seem disturbing and brutal. Historically, like the other Old Testament writings, it is not accurate. The Israelites are not alone in the Promised Land. Other people or tribes are living there among them. This narrative with its violence and brutality is troubling - at least for white Christians. A Seminary professor of the Old Testament warned her students that this was a difficult book to understand.

The African and African-American students in her class disagreed. They didn't understand the White Christian problem with Joshua. They saw victory and hope in the passage. It was a victory tale. God is fighting on our behalf. The students spiritualised the events rather than looking at them as true historical events. They saw the promise: God will give what God has promised. God will be there.

The evil and trauma of this world is often used as a weapon. Yet, God's promise is there in the midst of evil. God doesn't turn a blind eye to evil. God will do something for the prevailing righteous. The people of God are not like

everyone else. They trust in God. Yet, we want God to be “nice.” But “nice” doesn’t overpower evil. God is fighting forces opposed to God. God is calling upon the people to bear witness.

So, Joshua summons the people to Shechem to renew their covenant with God. Shechem was the place where Abram first encounters Yahweh and enters a covenantal relationship as recorded in Genesis. It was here that Abram built an altar, the first sanctuary to Yahweh in the land of promise.

Joshua facilitates a covenant renewal ceremony. Now assimilated among other groups (because they did not annihilate all the indigenous people of the land), the Israelites experience the lure of engaging and worshipping foreign deities and intermarriage. Joshua invokes collective memory (recalling covenantal agreements with the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the possession of the land) as a reminder of Yahweh’s salvific history and of their obligations of fidelity to Yahweh’s covenants and commandments.

On the basis of this history of Yahweh’s benefactions, Joshua issues a threefold challenge to which the people offer their hearty assents. He recounts the history of this covenant relationship. He begins by remembering their distant past. “Long ago” literally means “from eternity,” when the ancestors of the Israelites lived “in the land beyond the river” – the Euphrates. He recites what God did for their ancestors; he gave them descendants; afflicted their enemies and brought them out of slavery; brought them to a new land and gave them victory over the Amorites.

Now Joshua does not follow the typical tripartite recollection of the ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Instead he goes even further back in history to Terah, Abraham’s father, and includes the lesser known Nahor, Abraham’s brother. In doing so, Joshua shows that from the story’s beginning there have always been under-currents of the Israelites’ faithfulness. Terah and Nahor “served other gods.” When Jacob and Laban (his father-in-law) make their

covenant at Mizpah, they swear by the God of Abraham **and** the gods of Nahor. From the beginning of Israel's history, there is evidence that there were those who did not choose to serve Yahweh (not that different from people today)!

Against this background of polytheistic ancestors who served other gods, Joshua exhorts the people to fear and serve the God of the Israelites in complete faithfulness. "Serve God" becomes the core refrain of Joshua's message, his mantra, as it were.

The leaders of the community; the elders, heads, judges, and officers are summoned to station themselves and stand upright in the presence of God. These individuals possess wisdom and memory, live as visible examples of covenant faithfulness, dedicate their lives to justice, and are entrusted with responsibility for the people's welfare.

The emphasis then moves and falls on what people will do. The Hebrew verb '*abad*' has several meanings; "to serve," "to be a slave," "to work," "to worship." The link between worship and slavery may seem distasteful. But what Joshua is offering the tribes of Israel is a choice: they can and will only give their whole selves to one kind of relationship. Worship of false gods is slavery to human artifice and self-interest. Joshua calls Israel out of bondage into the freedom of life in covenant with God.

Now, after the history lesson, Joshua comes to the meat of his sermon. "Now," he begins, perhaps meaning "after all that I have reminded you of," worship or revere Yahweh; serve only Yahweh with uprightness and faithfulness; put away or reject the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve Yahweh. The implication of these words is plain: it was often easy for the ancient ones of Israel to fall into false worship in those places where they have lived up to now, namely beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt.

But now that the promise of Yahweh has been fulfilled, there can be no excuse for worshipping and serving any other god in the land of promise. Immediately, Joshua holds up the possibility, however ludicrous, that these people may decide not to worship Yahweh, even in the face of the overwhelming evidence of Yahweh's power and gift.

But the people are quick to say, "Far be it from us that we should abandon Yahweh and serve other gods!" They were listening to Joshua's sermon! They echo back the history that Joshua himself recounted in detail for them. "We have heard what you said, Joshua; what sort of fools do you take us for? We believe it is Yahweh who has done all that you say." The second reason emerges naturally from the first: if God has done this for us, then he is our god. This affirmation becomes more profound when it is set against the background of polytheism.

Yet Joshua remains suspicious of the people's promise of strict obedience. "You are not capable of serving Yahweh," he thunders, precisely because "Yahweh is holy, and zealous, that is single-minded, and will not forgive your rebellion or sins. Joshua points to the availability of other gods: the gods of the Amorites, the gods of their ancestors, or the Lord. The people rightly acknowledge that Yahweh is *their* God. It would be absurd to serve other gods, and to forsake their God! It is significant that the people affirm this. The Israelites often suffer from amnesia when it comes to remembering God's past acts, but not here.

They respond, "No! We really will worship Yahweh." At this, Joshua challenges the people with a final and terrible warning. Very well, he says, "Do you agree to be witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to worship the Lord?" In other words, their deeds, will be forever a witness that their choice of Yahweh is forever evaluated by what they do. And the people agree to this; "we are witnesses," they say.

Still, Joshua is not fully convinced by their words. “Now put aside the foreign gods (idols) that are among you and submit to the Lord God of Israel.” Apparently, during this entire dialogue, “foreign gods” have been lurking in the tents of the Israelite army! And Joshua will have none of it. And still one more time the people of Israel make an avowal of obedience; “We will worship the Lord our God and obey him.”

Even that is not enough for the suspicious and careful Joshua. He first writes the words of the people, and the covenant he made with them in the Law Scroll of God. He then takes a large stone and sets it up there under the oak tree near Yahweh’s shrine. Joshua says to all the people, “Look, this stone will be a witness against you, for it has heard everything Yahweh said to us. It will be a witness against you if you deny your God.” And finally Joshua allows the people to leave Shechem.

This drama reveals several important things. The people are simply not to be trusted! They may claim belief, but Joshua knows all too well that talk is cheap and obedience is costly. Also, Yahweh is a demanding God, expecting true and single-minded loyalty from those who claim to serve. Joshua’s words are in fact prophetic in several of the senses of the word. The people’s claims to obey Yehweh will again and again be tested throughout Israel’s subsequent history.

At the time of the settlement and afterwards, the Israelites lived in a world of many gods. These gods functioned as the mascot of the local population, since they believed their existence was divinely mandated. So, to fight against a local population meant to fight against their gods. Joshua, gave them not only a choice of faith, but also one of national allegiance. Joshua seemed to ask them, “Are you an Israelite or not?” There was no room to waver religiously or patriotically. So, get rid of other idols. The people renew their faith through the retelling of their history.

So were the early Israelites true monotheists? Didn't they believe in only one God? As a religious philosophy, monotheism reduces all divinity to one being and denies the possible existence of any greater power. The Israelites were a migrating people who did not bother with such philosophical questions. Their God was a national symbol; they rejected any other god simply because the other gods were not Israeli.

Monotheism, as a religious philosophy began with the Egyptians, not with the Israelites. However, the Israelites were the first practising monotheists. They were also the first to believe in a God who revealed himself not in the powers of nature, but in the events of history. As such, no image from nature could truly represent the power of God; so the lack of an image became part of the Israeli faith.

Today, our wars are for monetary gain and victory in the marketplace. Media floods us with seductive images that lead us away from faith. And, in today's multi-cultural society, there are many diverse philosophies. We face temptation at every turn. Do we stay faithful, or do we fall away? The challenge of Joshua is as relevant today as it was when he first spoke those words. What images or "idols" tempt us to spend our time and money in wasteful ways? Which hobbies or activities have become obsessions? How can we again put God first in our life?

Israel vows to serve Yahweh more than a dozen times. Service of Yahweh excludes the service of other gods. It often has been said that the First Commandment implicitly incorporates all the rest of the commandments, or as St. Augustine put it, "Love God and do what you want." That is if you love God, you will want to live for God and follow God's ways. Few of us are tempted by any gods of other nations or any gods with other names, but as Luther made clear in his explanation of the First commandment, anything one fears, loves, and trusts above everything else, whether it's riches, self, prestige, or whatever, is one's God. We all serve many gods.

Is God always first in our lives, or do we not in fact often serve other gods, by sins of omission and commission? None of us needs to be reminded that we sin daily. Joshua told the Israelites that God will not forgive rebellion or sins. Evil deeds do have bad consequences, and we should not put God to the test or take God's forgiveness for granted. Yet the God known to us in Jesus Christ regularly comes to us with words of absolution and forgiveness, seventy times or seventy times seven times. God loves and forgives with the hope and expectation that such love will lead to renewal in our lives, leading to growth in faith and to faith active in love. We, too, like Joshua's audience, will be moved and empowered by God's benefactions in Jesus Christ both to serve and obey.

A pastor assumes Joshua's role when he or she invites people to affirm their covenant with God and one another, but seldom has the courage in the follow-through. We are invited to make the sort of promise that Joshua wanted from the Israelites during our baptisms. Now, a courageous pastor would ask more than the generic: "Do you promise to raise this child in the Christian faith and offer him or her the nurture of the Christian church?"

Instead, in front of God and the whole congregation, a gutsy pastor might ask; "Do you promise to get him or her out of bed, dressed and here every Sunday morning for the next eighteen years, even when you've had a long week or you'd rather sleep in or there's a hockey game or when this darling infant has grown into a surly, tattooed teenager who thinks church is 'dumb'?"

Pastors are never that honest or bold about baptismal vows. Joshua probably would have been. When people join the church, Joshua would have asked more than a rote; "Do you renounce the powers of evil and seek the freedom of new life in Christ?" After the unsuspecting new member said yes, Joshua would have followed with, "So, when you buy your next car, or electronic gadget, will you resist all the commercial hype that encourages

you to overspend on something that eats up resources and pollutes the air?”

Had Joshua presided at an ordination, I doubt he would have let the ordinands get by with a simple vow to study, pray, teach and preach. He probably would have demanded, “Will you give up your personal gods of procrastination, perfectionism and the pursuit of trivia?”

Pastors might find it difficult to beef up the traditional vows of baptism or membership. For many people, the primary experience of covenants: marriage, family, church affiliation or job have been their endings. How do we capture Joshua’s passion for keeping our covenant with God without sounding judgmental and damning of persons whose human covenants have been broken by design or default?

And what about us? The stone at Shechem still stands as witness against all those who profess belief and service but too often turn to the gods beyond the river, who are ever ready to offer things to us too beautiful and too enticing to pass up. We need to hear again and again the careful warnings of Joshua on the hills of Shechem; their echo still sounds. How difficult is making the choice to believe? Or - what is the cost of faith?

In the gospel for today, Jesus likewise recognizes the necessity of “choosing to serve God,” even though it will be difficult. In response to Jesus’ hard teachings, some leave. Jesus recognizes that the twelve may want to leave, too. Peter responds, saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” They can leave, but why would they? Jesus has brought them this far, and he is their God, with the words of eternal life. Should that not be enough of an incentive for us to worship, serve, and work for our God?

Amen.

Pentecost 19 Prayers of the People October 16, 2022

Harvest Intercessions

Let us offer our prayers to God for the life of the world and for all God's people in their daily life and work. God, the beginning and end of all things, in your providence and care you watch unceasingly over all creation; we offer our prayers that in us, and in all your people, your will may be done, according to your wise and loving purpose in Christ our Lord.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all through whom we receive sustenance and life; for farmers and ranchers, agricultural workers, for fishermen, for packers, distributors, truckers, and company boards; as you have so ordered our life that we depend upon each other, enable us by your grace to seek the well-being of others before our own.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer**

We pray for all engaged in research to safeguard crops against disease, increase crop yields, for developing renewable sustainable food production practices amidst climate change, to increase the possibilities of increasing food security and abundant life among those who hunger and whose lives are at risk. Prosper the work of their hands and the searching of their minds, that their labours may benefit the welfare of all.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for governments and aid agencies, including CLWR, responding in those areas of the world where there is disaster, drought, flooding and starvation. By the grace of your Spirit, touch our hearts and the hearts of all who live in comfortable plenty and with a spirit of gratitude for all we have been given, to give as we are able and make us wise stewards of your many blessings and gifts.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are ill, remembering those in hospital and nursing homes and all who are known to us. We also pray for all who care for them. Give skill and understanding to all who work for their well-being.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer.**

We remember those who have died, whom we entrust to your eternal love in the hope of resurrection to new life.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer.**

We offer ourselves to your service, asking that by the Spirit at work in us others may receive a rich harvest of love and joy and peace.

Lord of all life: **hear our prayer.**

God of grace, as you are ever at work in your creation, so fulfil your wise and loving purpose in us and in all for whom we pray, that with them and in all that you have made, your glory may be revealed and the whole earth give praise to you. We pray through the power of your Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**