

Joshua 24:1-18

Martin Luther King Jr., begins his autobiography by stating, “Of course I was religious. I grew up in the church. My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy’s brother is a preacher. So, I didn’t have much choice.”

But, of course, King, like all of us, did have a choice, and he made it with his whole heart, soul, mind and strength. One wonders if King heard our passage from Joshua during his early days of instruction in the faith, and whether he recognized the situation Joshua speaks to as his own situation: a community with a historical, covenantal relationship with God which must nevertheless choose to live into that relationship.

Joshua starts by rehearsing Yahweh’s first-person history with the ancestors, the Exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wandering and the gift of the land. Land, towns, vineyards and olive groves are not something achieved by Israel; they are all Yahweh’s generous gift.

On the basis of this history of Yahweh’s benefactions, Joshua issues a threefold challenge to which the people offer their hearty assent. Joshua has summoned the people to Schechem to renew their covenant with God. He recounts the history of this covenant relationship. He begins by remembering their distant past “long ago”, meaning “from eternity”, when

their ancestors lived “in the land beyond the river”, the Euphrates. He tells what God did for their ancestors; he gave them descendants and good land; afflicted their enemies and brought them out of slavery; brought them to a new land and gave them the victory over the Amorites.

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Schechem, the place where, long ago, God had appeared to Abraham and promised the gift of the land. There, Abraham built an altar, the first sanctuary to Yahweh in the land of promise.

Joshua does not follow the typical tripartite recollection of the ancestors; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Instead he goes 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) made their covenant at Mizpah, they swore 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 Yahew! (not so different from today’s situation).

Against this background of polytheistic ancestors who served other gods Joshua exhorts the people to fear and serve God in complete faithfulness. “Serve God” becomes the core refrain of Joshua’s message – his mantra.

The leaders of the community are also a physical reminder – 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 falls on what the 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 worship of false gods is slavery to human artifice and self-interest. Joshua calls Israel out of this bondage into the freedom of life in covenant with God.

After the history lesson, Joshua comes to the meat of his sermon. “Now,” he begins, “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 easy for the ancient ones of Israel to fall into false worship in those places where they 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, however, 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 actually 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. 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.

Joshua is still suspicious of the people's promise of strict obedience. Joshua points to the availability of other gods – the gods of the Amorites, the gods of their ancestors, and the Lord. But the people rightly acknowledge that Yahweh is ***their*** God. It would be absurd to serve other gods, and to forsake God, when this God is ours! 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 repeat, "No! We really will worship Yahweh." At this, Joshua gives them 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 both forever and forever will be evaluated by what they do. And the people agree; “we are witnesses.”

That is not enough for the suspicious and careful Joshua. He 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 them, “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 prophetic. The people’s claims to obey Yahweh 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. So 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.

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 in the marketplace, not victory on the battlefield. Media floods us with seductive images that leads 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 do we once again put God first in our life?

Israel vows to serve Yahweh more than a dozen times. It has often 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 is riches, self, prestige, or whatever, is one’s God. We all serve many gods.

None of us needs to be reminded that we sin daily. Joshua told the Israelites that they should not put God to the test or take God’s forgiveness for granted. Yet the God known to us in Jesus Christ 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.

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 grow with 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’?”

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 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?

The following midrash is retold. It was well known (and even appears in the Quran). Joshua revealed Abraham's idolatrous past to the Israelites when he said: 'Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.'

It is true that Abraham served other gods, but he did not do so willingly. Though he had no teacher, Abraham reasoned on his very own at an early age that there was only one God. When Abraham was small, he spent the night in a cave and saw all the stars twinkling in the night sky. He said to himself, "These are my gods..." But then the sun rose and all the stars disappeared so Abraham realized they couldn't be gods so he decided the sun must be his god. And it was for a day, until the sun set and young Abraham realized it was no more powerful than the stars. Then Abraham saw the moon. The moon who seemed to go its own way, day and night, and Abraham thought the moon would be his god. But then the clouds veiled the moon in darkness.

At that moment, young Abraham realized that there must be an unseen God who has power over all things. So Abraham grew up not believing in false gods and longing to know more about the one true God. For

most of his life, he studiously avoided serving idols but his father's profession made it impossible not to. Terah ran an idol shop in Ur and once he commanded Abraham to mind the shop while he was away at a festival. So, for that week, Abraham reluctantly served idols out of obedience to his father.

Now, he managed to avoid selling idols in this way: Whenever a customer would come into the shop and ask for an idol, he would ask him, "Sir, how old are you?" If the man said, "60," Abraham would say, "Then why would you who are 60 want to serve one who is only two days old?" Then the potential customer would leave, embarrassed.

But one day, an old widow came in with a plate of fine flour and asked Abraham to feed it to the gods so they would hear her prayers. Abraham took the plate of flour from her intending to do nothing with it. But the more he thought about that old widow giving away what little she had to gods of wood and clay who could do nothing for her, the angrier he got. So he placed the flour in the middle of the floor. Then he took a stick and smashed and smashed all the idols in the shop, save the largest. Finally, he put the stick in the large idol's hands and threw flour on its face.

When Terah returned from the festival, he was outraged. "What have you done to my shop?" he demanded. Abraham said, "Father, it is not my fault. A widow left this flour for the idols. No sooner had she left, than all the little idols started arguing over whose flour it was and who would

eat first. But this big idol over here said that the flour was his and he picked up a stick and dared all the other idols to touch it. Well, they didn't listen and the large idol smashed them all to pieces and began to eat the flour himself." "What kind of fool do you take me for," Terah shouted, "Idols don't move or talk!" "Father," said Abraham, "Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?"

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.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of deliverance, you saved the people of Israel and chose Joshua so to lead your people to the Promised Land. Choose us and equip us to live with faith and peace. We pray these things to the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**