

Aug. 16, 2015 – Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 (Epistle: Ephesians 5:6-21 Gospel: John 6:51-69)

Choose to Fear and Serve the LORD, who Chose and Saved You

There is an adage that says, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” It refers to the fact that we are often not satisfied with what we have or with our circumstances. We think that someone else has it better and that we would be happier “on the other side of the fence” so to speak, because things look better over there.

In our text today, God calls us to consider if that is really true. In particular, would we be better off with a different god (or no god at all)? Through Joshua, the Lord tells you to choose to fear and serve Him, because He is the One who chose and saved you.

On the surface, Joshua’s call for the people to choose whom they will serve may seem to contradict what we talked about last week: that we cannot choose to believe in Jesus – we cannot choose to have faith. It is true that we cannot choose God because we are all by nature dead in our trespasses and sins and naturally resist God. But Joshua is here addressing the children of Israel, people who already have the gift of faith from the LORD. As those already made alive by faith, they can choose to abandon the LORD, or by the Spirit whom they already have received, confirm their faith in the Lord and serve Him.

Joshua says, “*Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth*” (v. 14). The reason that Joshua calls the people to fear and serve the Lord – what the “therefore” is there for in our translations – is the blessing and salvation that the Lord has given the people. In verses 2-13 of this chapter (which our reading skips), Joshua recounts the history of the Israelites up to this point. He reminds them that the Lord called Abraham from the other side of the River and brought him and his wife Sarah the land of Canaan and promised to multiply their descendants (v. 3). The large crowd now gathered before Joshua shows that God fulfilled this promise. Joshua reminds them that Jacob and his children then went down to Egypt (v. 4) and that the Lord later delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and destroyed the Egyptians in the sea (v. 5-7). Joshua goes on to recount how the Lord sustained the people through the wilderness and brought them to the promise land where they were now standing (v. 7-13). The people echo Joshua’s words in their response: “*the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land*” (v. 17-18).

The very place where “*Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel*”, Shechem, would remind the people of these things. Shechem was in the dead center of the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised to give Abraham and his descendants. It was the first place that Abraham settled when the Lord led him to Canaan from beyond the river and it was there at Shechem that God promised Abraham: “*To your descendants I will give this land*” (Genesis 12:6-7). Abraham then built an altar there to the Lord – it was the first altar to the Lord in the promised land. It was at Shechem that Jacob bought a plot of ground and erected another altar (Genesis 33:18-20). And it was on that plot of ground that Jacob bought that Joseph’s bones, which the children of Israel had brought out of Egypt, were buried (Joshua 24:32).

Joseph believed in God’s promise and so he made the Israelites promise to carry his bones from Egypt when God would deliver them from there. This was over three hundred fifty years before God led the Israelites out of Egypt. Hebrews 11:22 points to this as an example of faith. It says:

“By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.”

But those who chose the verses for our reading today omitted Joshua’s review of these things and the burial of Joseph’s bones at the end of the chapter, probably because for us today these things that the Lord did for Israel are not as important as what they point to: the salvation that God has given you by sending His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus perfectly obeyed all of God’s commandments in order to fulfill the Law for you. He was put to death on the cross, even though He was sinless and innocent, to pay for the sins of the whole world – to pay for your sins. And He rose again from the dead to show that He had conquered sin and death.

Instead of physical slavery, Jesus has delivered you from slavery to sin and death. You have been set free from sin (Romans 6:18) and it no longer has control over you (Romans 6:14). Being freed from sin, you no longer need to fear death. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23).

Just as God guided, protected, and provided for the Israelites as they wandered in the desert for forty years, so God guides, protects and provides for us during this life of seventy, eighty, ninety (or however many) years. This does not mean that the road will always be easy. The Lord tested the Israelites during those forty years in order to strengthen their faith. In the same way the Lord allows us to face difficulties so that we learn to trust Him more and more and grow in our faith.

The Lord led the Israelites to the promised land, and He is leading us to our promised land. It is not an earthly one, however, but an eternal, heavenly inheritance that Jesus Christ is preparing for you (John 14:2-3). It is *“the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”* (Matthew 25:34). It is not a land flowing with milk and honey (see Exodus 3:8, 17, Leviticus 20:24), but a land in which flows the pure river of the water of life (Revelation 22:1), so that you can enjoy it forever.

Just as God chose the Israelites, so God has chosen you (John 15:16). God did not choose Abraham because he was better than anyone else or because he deserved it. In fact he didn’t. As Joshua reminds us here, Abraham and his family – the forefathers of the Israelites – served other gods on the other side of the River (v. 14). They were idol worshippers! It was simply God’s gracious (undeserved) choice. In the same way it not anything that we deserve. We have all sinned against God and failed to do all that He commands. Like Abraham and his fathers, we have served other “gods”. But God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) by His good pleasure (Ephesians 1:5).

So Joshua says: *“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve”* (v. 15). When you consider all that God has done for you: the great salvation He has accomplished for you in Jesus Christ, and the eternal home He has prepared for you, is there really any choice? Is there really any other option? As Peter answered Jesus in our Gospel reading when Jesus asked the twelve if they wanted to leave Him as well: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (John 6:68-69).

There is no other God. There is salvation in no one else. *“Therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord!”* (v. 14).

The choice seems easy. You probably have never been tempted to worship another “god” or to bow down before an idol. But the Lord is not talking only about such open idolatry here, but He is also talking about the attitude of our hearts. Later in this speech Joshua tells the people: *“in-*

cline your heart to the LORD God of Israel" (v. 23). The Lord cannot tolerate any rival. Anything we fear, trust or love more than God becomes an idol in our hearts. How often have you loved yourself more than God? How often have you loved yourself more than someone else? If you're like me, too many times to count. We often trust in ourselves and our own resources more than we trust in God. And God calls us to "*serve Him in sincerity and in truth*" (v. 14). That means mere outward actions or lip-service are not enough.

That is why it is good for us to hear these words spoken through Joshua and to be reminded again of the great love that God has demonstrated towards us in that while we were still sinful idolators, God chose us and sent His Son to die for us (Romans 5:8). He redeemed us through the blood of Christ and brought us to saving faith through the good news that we have in the Bible, and He continues to forgive us and lavish on us all His undeserved gifts of grace.

When we consider all that God has done for us, can we do anything other than to pledge ourselves to fear and serve the Lord? Now when the Lord talks about His people "fearing" Him, He does not mean that we should be afraid of Him or live in dread. Psalm 130:4 says (to the Lord): "*But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.*" Forgiveness produces the opposite of dread, so "fear" here does not mean to be afraid. To "fear" God means to stand in awe of Him, to honor Him and give Him our allegiance out of thanks for what He has done. It means to trust, love and worship Him and give Him the glory that He deserves (Psalm 29:2) because of all the great things that He has done.

"Serve" can also be a word we do not like to hear. But it one we cannot avoid in this text as Joshua uses it here seven times, either of serving the Lord or serving a false god (vv. 14-15). To serve the Lord means to worship, trust, love and gratefully obey Him.

The world, our sinful flesh, and the devil all try to convince us that this is something that we do not want to do. Our enemies within and without want us to think that serving the Lord is a burden, as Joshua says here: "*And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve*" (v. 15).

The truth is, we really do not have a choice. We always serve someone or something. If we do not serve the Lord, we serve our sinful selves. But God has freed us from slavery to ourselves so that we can serve Him (2 Corinthians 5:15). And serving and obeying God is not burdensome (1 John 5:3). Psalm 100:2 talks about serving the Lord with gladness. It is something we can enjoy doing! It is a joy to serve the Lord because He is faithful. He has kept His promises, and He has saved us. We worship, love, trust and obey Him with glad and thankful hearts because of all that He has done for us.

That does not mean it is always easy to serve the Lord. As I said, the world, the devil and our sinful nature conspire to lead away from serving God. But take comfort in Joshua's well-known words here: "*But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*" (v. 15). Because of the Lord's undeserved love, powerful acts of salvation, and faithfulness in fulfilling His promises, Joshua declared that he and his house will serve the Lord, even if they is the only ones who will! As we look around, we may find ourselves in a minority. But may God give us the faith and courage to make the same declaration as Joshua and may God enable us to serve Him as He enabled Joshua.

And may we respond as the Israelites here do: "*Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD*" (v. 16). For the LORD our God is He who chose us and brought us out of the land of outer darkness, from the house of bondage to sin and death through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, and it is He who preserves us in all our days until He brings us to our promised

eternal inheritance. Therefore, may we always declare that “*We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God*” (v. 18). Amen.

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