

Pastor's Message – 11/8/2020
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

I've brought in a jar full of M & M's; you may have seen and responded to the email or stopped in the Church office and entered your guess. I've also asked you to submit your 3 favorite hymns. Keep those in mind and we'll talk about them later in the Message.

Last week, we celebrated All Saints' Sunday. They're the ones waving palm branches and crying, "victory belongs to our God" that the Book of Revelation talks about. They are the ones we remember and whose stories have shaped us and inspired us

What do we learn from our ancestors: the saints of the past? What stories do saints tell?

Today we've heard something about those stories through a public conversation between Joshua, the successor to Moses who brought the people into their promised homeland, and the leaders of the people.

The very first thing we learn about the stories of the saints from that conversation is they are stories of a God who called us while we may very well have been serving other gods in a place far away from where God was calling us to go (verse 2).

Now, a lot of people in the United States can relate to having ancestors who came from a very different culture and a faraway place. But for someone like me who grew up in a Roman Catholic family, the idea that my ancestors served other gods is a bit hard to relate to.

Of course, by the time Joshua is talking to the people about their history as we pick up his story this morning, it has likely been well over three centuries since Abraham had lived and died. His name and some of the stories of his life had been carried forward through the ages in oral tradition. But the first thing Joshua wants to tell the people about their ancestor as he is about to finish his work among them is that Abraham was not always connected to the God they knew as their God. He had served other gods, as his family had before him.

And the second thing he wanted them to know about Abraham's story was that God made a choice first, God reached out to Abraham, and then Abraham responded by choosing to follow our God. God chose to call this man who was not serving the true God, and Abraham chose to pay attention and devote his life to following where God then led him. God acted first. God called. Then Abraham put aside all other allegiances and followed.

That's our experience, too, isn't it? John and Charles Wesley would call this prevenient grace, that is, before we were even trying to pay attention to what God was calling us to do, even before we *could* pay attention to such things, God called, kept calling, and keeps calling.

For many of you, you heard that call and followed. You made a pledge personally at your baptism if you were older, or perhaps at your confirmation that you would renounce all other allegiances, and serve Jesus as Lord, accepting the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression. And over the years, you've learned what it means to rely on grace to keep you connected to God and to others in the body of Christ, the church, and to serve as Christ's representatives in the world.

This is our story. We were serving other gods. We were following our own way. Even if we were "good Christian people" and "in the church," and for some of us, even if we were confirmed and meant it at the time, we still hadn't completely broken all those prior allegiances. Just being "in the church" may not really have been enough of an influence to do what the church promises to pray for us at every baptism-- "that we may become true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life."

Well, hear this good news! God keeps calling! The Spirit keeps working! Prevenient grace is still active and relevant! Even when our story is that we're ignoring God, God doesn't ignore us. Indeed, God is calling us toward the fullness of life in Christ even then, even when we're actively serving other gods or ends.

Hear this even better news. We don't have to keep ignoring God's call and God's promise. We can "choose THIS day whom we will serve."

How do people react to the Joshua story? "We choose God," the people say. "No you can't," Joshua responds. "Yes, we will," the people say. "If you don't, the LORD will destroy you," Joshua concludes.

Unfortunately, that has been too often the story of God's people. Too often, that has been our story. We say we'll be faithful and commit ourselves to God and the church. We say we'll be faithful and we aren't. We make a start and then we don't follow through; something else always seems to come up. But then we start again. You lapse out of faith for a time. God is there, but you're not. Or you find yourself in one of those dark valleys.

As more and more churches, including ours, face difficult times, when resources, financial and personal, seem to be drying up, it is important to remember where we have come from and how we have come to this place and time. The world, this country, our state, and our area face difficult and trying times. That's why our story, remembering and retelling the story is so important. It gives us hope when we are in those dark places. It reminds us of what God has done and of God's love for us. That is why we need to hear and tell the story of God's love and presence and faithfulness.

Why was this church built here? What forces and visions moved the ancestors? What obstacles needed to be overcome? Does this church still live out that dream or is there a new dream

to live out? How is it being kept alive and how is it progressing? What are the stories that continue to move us and move us ahead? What are the stories that we are creating now that our ancestors in the church 10 or 20 years or more will remember and tell? Will there be ancestors in 10 or 20 or 50 years?

After Christianity was established as the official religion of Rome in the fourth century, soldiers chose, and in some cases were required, to be baptized. During the baptismal ceremony, a number of soldiers continued to demonstrate their allegiance to Rome. They did this, as they were being immersed in the baptismal water, by holding their right hand up and out of the water, keeping it dry. The right hand was the hand that held their sword, and that hand still belonged to Caesar.

It seems sometimes that we continue to act that way. We may answer with Joshua and the Israelites “we will serve the LORD,” but then things get in the way and we choose other priorities. People who have made a public proclamation of membership all of a sudden or over time forget they ever made those promises and drift away or choose other priorities over the church. There are other gods in the world that people choose as their priority and their spiritual growth and their future and the church suffers because of those choices.

It's almost like Joshua was saying to the people, "Look around. Name another object of our commitment that will measure up to God in your lives. Find another source of contentment like God. You'll see that you can't. The facts won't allow us to come and see it any other way. God alone has been the source of your victory, and he alone needs to be the object of your devotion."

Having weighed the option, Joshua shows us next how to register our choice. With his classic statement, "Choose this day," he suggests the value of making our choice and registering it in the presence of others. With his declaration, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord," he gives us an example to follow when we think about how to register our choice to give ourselves to Jesus.

Joshua's comments are blunt and to the point. If Israel isn't going to serve Yahweh, fine -- just make a choice. He seems to understand that Israel isn't very good about keeping their promises, yet the people tell him this time will be different. “We will serve the Lord.”

Let's get back to our canister of M & M's. There are exactly 323 M & M's in the jar. Who came closest to being right?

Let's go to your favorite hymns. And which one of these is closest to being right?

There is no “right answer;” a person's favorite hymn may be purely a matter of preference – may be a specific message from God that you need to hear. When you decide what to believe in terms of your faith and how to live out your faith, is that more like guessing the number of M & M's in a jar or more like choosing your favorite hymn?

Choosing to live out one's faith is more like choosing a favorite hymn. It is not a matter of verifiable fact. It is a matter of choosing to follow.

In worship we have an opportunity to make our choice and nail it down in our hearts. As we sit in our pews in worship services or you sit in your worship space at home, you can breathe a prayer of commitment to the Lord, saying after his people whom Joshua challenged to make up their minds, "We will serve the Lord!" In our times of private worship we can register our willingness to let the Lord have our lives. In our Bibles we can jot down the date and the time when we registered our choice. Maybe you can go back to your Membership certificate and point to the date that you made a commitment to the LORD in and through this Church.

Perhaps you have already made your choice, and you smile quietly as you reflect on the value of registering it in worship. Maybe you've set your heart on the Lord in a quiet place at a time that will always remain one of the critical turning points of your life. However, you could still be wavering in the sea of indecision, tossed back and forth. The time has come for you to choose. The time has come for you to say, "I will serve the Lord."

Joshua 24, the last chapter of the Book of Joshua functions as both narrative and ritual closure for the period of conquest and initial settlement of the Promised Land. As narrative closure, this chapter marks the end of years of fighting and struggle. As a ritual closure, the people renew their commitment to serve Yahweh alone, not their former gods (whether of Egypt or Iraq) and not the gods of the people among whom they now reside (Amorites are specifically named).

As narrative and as ritual, this story marks a different kind of rite of passage than the crossing of the Jordan that you can read about in the Book of Joshua chapter 3. The crossing of the Jordan marked a *transition* from one place to another, and in the process from one form of life to another, from journeying to occupying. So while there were marked changes in some ways of life, the people were still on the move.

This week's rite of passage marks a determination to "*stay put*," both in the land recently conquered and divided, and in allegiance to the LORD and the LORD's covenant with the people. If anything, this is an even more challenging transition, a change from movement to settlement, from acquisition to consolidation, from nearly constant transition to a kind of institutionalization.

I wonder where we are in that story. Is our call to "stay put" where we are, to remember the stories of the past or are we still on the move? Is this the perfect Church and nothing needs to change or are we still a church in transition? There is a history of this church, but we are no longer that church. The church of today is not the church of yesterday nor will it be the church of tomorrow. Where are we going and how are we going to get there?

A church which is not focused on the LORD, a church which is not focused on prayer and worship, a church which is not focused on praise and thanksgiving and telling the stories of what God has done and what God is still doing and giving God glory will not stand. A church which does not stand up and bless the LORD and shout, “we will serve the LORD” is not a church that will last beyond the current generation.

It is vitally important for our church to tell the story of our faith, what we believe and why we believe it and follow up with action and commitment. Let us make a covenant today to follow the LORD. Let us stand up today and declare, we will serve the LORD!”