

“The Choice We Make”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

This has been a long week for our country. Even though we were warned in the weeks leading up to the election that it would take some time for ballots to be counted and final results to be formalized, I don't think any of us imagined what that truly meant. Whether we went to the polls on Tuesday to cast a ballot in-person, or went to an early-voting center in the weeks before Election Day, or requested an absentee ballot which we submitted prior to Tuesday, those of us who were eligible were given an opportunity to make our choice as part of this democratic republic.

What gives me great hope is that we are on track for more people to have voted in this election than ever before in our nation's history. As a student of history, I have always lamented the fact that our voter turnout has been so low in proportion to other democracies across the world. It is heartening to see so many more people engaged and participating in the process this year.

What is sobering is that we are a nation that continues to be starkly divided in our political views and choices. The margins within the state tallies for the presidential election bear that out. Those divisions are found within our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our schools, and yes, our places of worship. I know many of you well enough that some of you are devastated by the election results, and some of you are ecstatic by them. And you might even be sitting next to each other this morning!

Which leads us to ask: How will we choose to move forward as citizens of this country, and as disciples of Jesus Christ? Will we refuse to treat someone with dignity and respect once we realize their political party affiliation, or will we look beyond what separates us and work together toward a common calling under God? We have made specific choices this past week on a ballot. Now, what choices will we make to live out our calling as sisters and brothers in Christ?

Perhaps we are given some guidance in the story we have heard from the Old Testament today. The story of the Israelite people is a familiar one for most of us. The people were called into being from Abraham and Sarah through a covenant with God. They were the children of promise, and through Isaac and Jacob they heard God's call to be distinct from the other peoples of the world. Yet they became enslaved in Egypt, when Joseph was sold by his brothers, and spent many, many years of hardship under the

rule of the Pharoahs.

God did not forget them in their trial, and called from among them Moses as a leader. With the help of his brother Aaron, Moses followed God's commands to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt. First, he pestered Pharoah repeatedly, warning of the plagues which kept on coming. Then, he led the Israelites out of Egypt into Sinai, and for forty years they wandered and wandered, constantly being guided by God's Spirit in the pillar of a cloud. After many upheavals and questions of his leadership, Moses brought his people to the brink of the conclusion of their journey: the land of Canaan. The Lord had promised them a new land, and he did not disappoint. In Canaan they would be free of bondage, able to live their lives in thanksgiving to God their keeper. But their leader Moses would not enjoy that opportunity. That was not his role as called by God. He had fulfilled it in Egypt and Sinai. He died after he saw Canaan from the top of a mountain. What would the people of Israel do?

As in the past, when there was concern or confusion of any sort, God provided for Israel's needs. Out of the people God called Joshua to lead them into Canaan. Joshua had been Moses' assistant, and the Lord spoke to him: "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites . . . As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail or forsake you" (Josh. 1:2-5). Joshua was to lead the transition of Israel's life from nomads to settlers, from a people without a home to a people fulfilling God's promise.

And this he did. Joshua was a mighty warrior, defeating the peoples of Canaan with much determination. He sent spies into Jericho to scout the enemy's armies, and a prostitute named Rahab protected them from disclosure to the king. In the battle for Gibeon, the Lord answered Joshua's request for the sun to stand still, and with the extra hours of daylight he and the Israelites defeated the Amorites that day. All in all, Joshua was a fiercely devoted man to the Lord, and the Lord rewarded Joshua for his devotion with victories and claims of the land of Canaan.

But as all people do, Joshua grew old. There came a point when his body could no longer take the battles and wars, and all that was left was his deep commitment to God. He was concerned about the people of Israel, though, and whether they fully understood what faith and devotion to Yahweh was all about. They were drawn to the other gods of the peoples they had conquered, and they were not always so exclusive in their commitment to the Lord.

So, Joshua calls the people together at Shechem, for he knows his life is near its end. He recounts for them all which they have been through together, and how the Lord has been right there guiding them and protecting them throughout. The Lord has provided for them a land on

which they have not worked, and towns and cities which they have not built (24:13). They have been conquerors of the land up until now, but now they are going to be settlers of the land. Just as they had been in a transition before, they will be in another transition now.

But this transition will require a new devotion and commitment to the Lord their God, and Joshua is not sure whether they have it in them. Joshua says to them, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good” (24:19-20). To serve and honor this Lord requires much. It requires sincerity and faithfulness, it requires turning away from other distractions and temptations, it requires giving of your whole self to God’s commands and obeying them fully. Joshua knows this because of how God has acted in his life. Now he is pleading with the Israelites that this level devotion will require a great, great deal.

More than anything, it means making a choice. Choosing to serve the one Lord who is Creator of this world. Choosing to serve without hesitation or diversion whatever God calls on you to do through his Spirit. Choosing to be faithful even in the most dire of circumstances.

The choices we make day-to-day are pretty mundane: which restaurant am I going to eat at? Which route to work am I going to take? What clothes will I wear today? And there are choices which have a deeper and significant influence on our lives. Which college will I choose to attend? Which job will I choose in order to pursue my career? Where will our family choose to live so that our children will attend a specific school?

But in our lives of faith, how do the choices we make represent our faith to others? When sporting events or extra-curricular activities conflict with church activities, how will our choice reflect our faith? When anger and pain don’t allow us to offer forgiveness and reconciliation to others, how will our choice reflect our faith? When we witness someone in need yet are rushing to make a “necessary” appointment, how will our choice reflect our faith? And when we are challenged to make those choices, who will we rely on: ourselves, or our God?

Joshua challenged the Israelites to make a choice at Shechem. Either follow the Lord your God, or follow all those foreign gods which belong to the Ammorites, the Moabites, and the Canaanites. Don’t be wishy-washy. Don’t try to have the best of both worlds. Don’t attempt to straddle the fence and think that God isn’t watching you. Make a choice: either Yahweh or Baal. Joshua has made his choice: “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (24:15). Now it is up to the people to make their choice.

In such a critical time in their lives, the Israelites chose God. They renewed their covenant with the Lord at Shechem because Joshua showed them how important God had been in their history up until that point. If they were to succeed as settlers of this new land, they had to distinguish their beliefs from those around them, and they had to seek to be faithful to those beliefs at all times. Yes, they would likely stumble at times. But they understood who God was and how important it was to serve the Lord with sincerity and faithfulness. Their response was clear to Joshua: "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey" (24:24). Their renewal of the covenant at Shechem not only identified Yahweh as their God, but it also identified themselves as the people of God.

At some point in time, we have been faced with a challenge, a decision, a turning point in our faith. Will we adhere to the comforts of this world, or will we take a risk and put our trust in the Lord who may not be right in front of us, but who certainly has provided for all our needs? When we have made that choice - to follow God and God's Son Jesus Christ - then we are facing up to the challenge that Joshua presented to the Israelites, and we are renewing the covenant that God has made with us as his children.

The Israelites faced a time of transition when Joshua spoke to them, and we as a community of believers are in the midst of transition, as well. How will we respond to the division that is so prevalent in our world right now? How will we continue to live through this uncertain time of social and racial unrest? How will the choices we make in the midst of this pandemic time impact who we are as a church in the future? Will we choose to remain faithful to our God, or will we seek the comfort and assurance of other gods? We have made a choice once before. Now, will we make that choice again, committing ourselves to the task which God has called us to do?

We are only here today because of the grace of God and the choice generations before us made in following the one Triune God. The choices we make today will impact generations which are to come. May we all listen this day to the Spirit's call, as we seek to make a choice that is faithful to the promises we have known through our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Thanks be to God. Amen.