

Joshua 24:15-24

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land.

Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” But Joshua said to the people, “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.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” *

Choosing the Lord - November 8, 2020

Joshua 24:15-24

Life is full of choices. They range from the simple, such as, “What should I have for breakfast?” to the profound, such as, “Is this the person with whom I want to spend the rest of my life?” Some of our choices have short-term consequences, like, “I should not have watched that TV program last night,” to the long term, “I’m so glad I chose to live in Collingswood.”

This week, as we all know, we have as a nation made some extraordinary choices for the people who will lead us for the next several years. Here in New Jersey, we’ve also decided to legalize marijuana, whatever that will mean.

As I am speaking to you now, the final outcome of our elections has yet to be decided. Many contests are still not finalized, especially the one for President of the United States. I know that many of you have expressed interest and concern over the elections. But as we have learned in our Bible Study, God has dealt with leaders of all kinds both in ancient Israel and even today. We certainly know from scripture and our own knowledge and experience that there is no such thing as a perfect human leader. They all have strengths and weaknesses. More interestingly, it is that the actions of imperfect human leaders have all kinds of unexpected and unintended consequences which in turn can inspire and propel people to do things they never previously considered.

That is where the people of Israel found themselves over 3500 years ago. They were people who had to make a choice, a profound choice that would affect their future literally forever. In fact, the choice Israel made, as recounted in today’s scripture, profoundly affects us today.

Joshua asked the people of Israel a question, “Whom do you choose to follow? The Lord, or some other God?” Now the passage we read today tells us that Israel voted to follow the Lord. Of course they did! If they had rejected God, there would be no Bible as we know it. There would be no Israel. I’m sure that God would have chosen another group of people to save because God is determined to reestablish God’s relationship with humanity — back then and right now.

Nonetheless, on that day so long ago, Israel was presented with this particular choice by Joshua. Now who was Joshua? Joshua was the successor to Moses. We all know Moses. Moses the lawgiver. Moses the liberator. Moses, the Hebrew baby somehow adopted and raised by the Pharaoh of Egypt. Moses the man who killed an Egyptian for abusing an Israelite and having then to flee. Moses, who was living a peaceful life far away from Egypt when God called him back to free his people. Moses who presided over ten plagues, concluding with the Passover which let his people go. Moses, who led his people to escape across the Red Sea. Moses who received the Ten Commandments from God. Moses who led the people in the desert for forty years, finally reaching the Jordan River to cross into the promised land. Moses, the leader who did not get to cross the

Jordan with his people because he died before he could enter the Promised Land, he only got to see it afar from the top a mountain.

So it fell on Joshua to take over. It was Joshua who lead the people into the land of Israel. It was Joshua who fought the battle of Jericho, the first of many battles the Israelites fought to claim or reclaim the land for themselves. With God's help, Joshua supervised the systematic conquest of Israel and so finally in this passage, we come to the end of his service to the Lord, having been an eyewitness to all of God's promises that would result in God's chosen people living in a land "flowing with milk and honey" and establishing a unique community dedicated to worshipping, serving, and following the commands of the one true God and creator of the universe.

It is, in short, "mission accomplished" for Joshua and the Israelites. A group of slaves, possessing only their faith in God, had succeeded in moving from Egypt to occupying and claiming the land of Israel for themselves — just as God had promised them. God had fulfilled God's side of the bargain. God freed the people and gave them the land.

But the essential question remained. Would the people of Israel fulfill their side of the bargain? Would they choose to worship and serve the God who freed them and gave them the Law? Would they devote themselves to following God's just and true rule, setting an example for the rest of the world and thereby bringing reconciliation and reunification between God and humanity? What would be their answer?

We know, of course, that way back then, the people of Israel chose to serve the Lord who freed them, fed them, organized them, and fought for them time and again. We wouldn't be here in this church today if they hadn't.

But now, 3500 years later, the choice remains: Whom will you choose to serve?

Most of us, I think, know the cultural icon Bob Dylan. He wrote and still performs so many enduring songs that spoke to not only the 60s situation but even now. Sometime in the late 70s, Bob Dylan converted to Christianity and on his album, Slow Train Coming he sang, "Gotta Serve Somebody." The refrain goes like this: "You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes /You're gonna have to serve somebody /Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

And he's right.

Built in to all of us is a "world view" — a way of looking at life and living that we use to make decisions. All of us have certain assumptions about the way the world works and we use these assumptions to determine how to behave in many situations. For example, if you believe the world is fundamentally an unfair, random place where people exist in order to take advantage of each other,

you might consider constant lying and cheating to be a normal way of life. In other words, “Eat or get eaten.”

Some others may see the world as a basically fair place, where most people have a certain level of respect for each other and they share genuine ideas about life about which they can all agree. If you are a person who believes most human beings are decent people, then you may use your life to seek to improve the welfare of others in addition to yourself. You assume that because people are decent, that they, too, will “have your back” at some point — just as you might have theirs.

There are as many world views, of course, as there are people. None of us sees the world in exactly the same way. Yet, because we are all guided by world views or principles which shape our thoughts and actions, we are indeed “Serving Somebody,” whether we admit it or not.

Devil, Lord, or some other god? We all have our own ideas about these. Presumably, while our ideas cannot be exactly the same, my ideas about God must be fairly similar to yours or you wouldn’t be “zooming in” week after week. Naturally, that means there are many others whose ideas about God are very different from ours and we will never see them on Zoom or in person.

One of the key reasons for attending worship is that the simple act of gathering together to focus on God forces us to admit that there is more to life and living than just the normal concerns of getting through the day. Of course, we all have to deal with the basics of life. We have to eat and sleep. We have to clothing on our backs and a safe place to dwell. And, most importantly, we have to have some means to pay for it all. On top of all that we take care of our health, choose how to spend our leisure time, and pursue our relationships with friends and family. This is life for all of us.

But while it is life for all of us, is that all there is to life? What a question! It is, in fact, the hardest question of all because it’s one that most of us spend a lot of time avoiding. Why am I here? Why are we here? After we’ve satisfied the basics, then what?

Having faith or being spiritual is our acknowledgement that “something” or “someone” is “out there” beyond the limits of our human senses. For those of us who have some sort of spiritual beliefs, and we comprise at least 80% of Americans, we all have our own understanding of what that “higher power” is and how we should interact with the higher power. Some view the higher power as rather remote and almost indifferent, others believe they share a kind of personal relationship.

Organized religion differs from faith and spirituality in that religion exists to offer a more specific explanation and understanding of who or what the “higher power” is and how human beings should interact with the high power.

As Christians, we say that there is one God who is responsible for creating the universe and establishing how everything works. We further say that God became a human being some 2000

years ago named Jesus to show us better how we can relate to God and each other. We also say that God lives in us through something we call the Holy Spirit who can directly influence our lives and actions when we allow the spirit to do so. All of our worship rituals, the songs, the prayers, the sermons, in every church of every denomination are intended to bring us closer to experiencing God in a more intimate way.

So the Israelites 3500 years ago were not just choosing to acknowledge a vague “higher power” to whom they could direct their worship. No, they were choosing to follow a God, one God, who decided for reasons unknown to select this particular group of people to be God’s chosen ones. The Israelites looked at all that had happened to them and concluded that 1) they could not have accomplished their flight from Egypt, their wandering in the desert, and the conquest of the land all by themselves and 2) going forward, they knew they would continue to need the help and protection of this God.

Therefore, they agreed to accept God and play by God’s rulebook because they knew they were far better off with this God on their side than without God.

So what about you? Can you put yourself in the place of the Israelites of so long ago? Can you look back on your life, as much as you may not want to, and see the hand of God in all your choices, the good ones and the bad ones. Is your being here sitting in front of your computer merely the product of random chance or the result of many events over which you had no control but was nevertheless influenced and shaped in ways you cannot explain?

Why not put an end to the speculation? Why not put an end to the ambiguity? Why not follow the lead of the Israelites who looking at their situation and admitted that only a God who knows us and loves us could have brought us here.

Hear the good news! Our God, revealed to us in Jesus and living in us as the Holy Spirit, loves you. Right now. No exceptions. Our God, this God, your God, has known you since before you were born and has walked beside you every single day of your life — whether you’ve known it or not, whether you’ve wanted it or not. And this God, our God, your God, will continue to walk with you and try to help you this day and every day forward simply because God loves you right now.

You have a choice. You can choose to accept and embrace the God who made you and loves you — learning more and more about God and what God is all about — or you can pretend to yourself that you have what you have in your life solely through your own efforts and nothing or nobody else was involved.

The invitation that Joshua offered the people of Israel still stands. Joshua invited them and now Joshua makes the same offer to you: Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel. Choose.