

### Choosing, Again and Again

Regardless of how you feel about the result of this past week's election, it seems to me that there is at least one thing that we can all agree on: it is a relief that the campaigning is over. The debates, TV ads, relentless media coverage, and phone calls; and we're not even in a so called battleground state. Can you imagine? All of that campaigning just to get us to vote one way or another. Don't get me wrong, I understand that electing the President is a tremendously significant choice, but in the end, isn't it amazing that all that time, money and energy is about one, singular decision? Can any one choice really be that important?

Today's scripture lesson from Joshua seems to be about one of these big, all-important decisions: "choose this day whom you will serve", Joshua challenges the people; "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." This choice, much like our election, is not a spur of the moment decision, but follows significant build up. The verses the lectionary skips over are the rest of Joshua's recounting of Israel's sacred history and all that God has done for them. Joshua is reminding them of all that they had been through together to get to this watershed moment where they're quite literally realizing their dream of the Promised Land. This is really what the whole book of Joshua is about: Israel's settlement of the land of Canaan and how they, with God's guidance, are striving to create a nation of justice and freedom. Imagine, entering a new land and being able to construct a whole new society, building their economic and political structure from the ground up, although, there were several elements of a solid civilization already in place.

For instance, Shechem was just about everything you would want in a major metropolis. Nestled between two mountains on a major trade route, the city had a built-in security and commerce. And, of course, there were the people who already lived there. One recurring theme and question of the book of Joshua is how will the Israelites interact with the native people and their culture? As former slaves in Egypt would they oppress the people they encounter there? Or would they share their new found freedom? And what about the indigenous culture: could they maintain their loyalty to God in this new religiously plural context? All of these decisions are connected to Joshua's challenge to the people: choose this day whom you will serve.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the passage is Joshua's reaction to the people's initial response. Almost immediately the people say they choose the LORD: far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord, they say. To which Joshua responds, you cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. Wait a minute, what is Joshua doing here? Why does he turn a 180? He asked them to serve the Lord and they have responded positively, but that does not seem to be good enough. Does he question their sincerity? Is he just being difficult? Or perhaps he just doesn't think they really, truly have it in them? It is hard to tell, but Joshua's response further indicates this is more than your normal, average, everyday choice. This is a defining moment for them. They are not merely picking a religion here, they are agreeing to live a certain way, to shape their own self-identity around the idea that they belong to God.

There is a word that summarizes what we are describing here. It is a familiar word, one that is perhaps a little too familiar and so has lost some of its impact on us, which is why I have resisted using it until now. The word is covenant. When you and I hear the word covenant, I am afraid we unconsciously translate it into contract. A contract is rather a static agreement between two parties, stating what both sides are obliged to do; a covenant is something much deeper and broader. It is not so much an agreement to do this or that between two parties, as it is a promise to be in relationship together, in all that is to come, in good times and bad. As such a covenant relationship cannot be entered into lightly or under compulsion. One must freely choose the relationship, which is perhaps why Joshua does not accept the people's first affirmation. He wants them to be really, really sure.

Which brings us to perhaps the most important thing that we need to remember about this passage: what the author is describing here is not the establishment of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, but its renewal. This is why Joshua recites the history of what God has done for them, to remind them that they already are in a covenantal relationship with God. It is just at the point when we get everything we desire that we are most apt to forget what is required of us. God has been faithful to the covenant. God is the one who called the people out of slavery, gave them the land which they now occupy, and God is the one who calls them to treat others fairly, to establish communities and a nation of justice and freedom. Have the people always lived up to their end of the bargain? No; but God has not given up on them and gives them opportunities such as the one Joshua is putting before them to renew their end of the covenant. In so many ways, this is a perfect example of one of

the most common themes in all of scripture: God choosing us, again and again and again.

But sometimes a choice like this is hard for us to see, because our lives are filled with so many of our own choices. It's almost impossible to fathom them all. Some are apparent, others so subtle that we don't even really think of them as choices. A few years ago a study examined the opportunities and decisions that face us every day. Its conclusion is rather counterintuitive to the way we typically view our busy lives. It surmises that the result of our industry, ingenuity and wealth is that "never in human history have people been so blessed with so many hours of nonworking 'leisure.'" I told you it was counterintuitive. Here is the catch: "But this growth in [so-called leisure] time pales relative to the accompanying growth in real incomes and technology, which means every free hour is now 'chased' by many more consumption opportunities—from video games and DVDs to sports events and trips."<sup>1</sup> In other words, we have more non-working time at our discretion, but we also have more things that have the potential to take up our time if we allow them. It makes one wonder, we often talk about how busy we are, sometimes as if we have no choice in the matter, yet perhaps we have more choice than we realize? Are we able to distinguish, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, between what is merely necessary and what is absolutely essential? Is our faith in God reflected in our priorities and commitments? Before we make crucial decisions, do we remind ourselves that whatever we choose, God has chosen us? And do we desire to reflect this identity in our lives? In other words, how are we doing with our end of that covenant?

---

<sup>1</sup> (Iannaccone, L.R. and Everton, S.F., "Never on Sunny Days: Lessons from Weekly Attendance Counts," June 2004).

There are those, both within and without the Christian faith, who view it as a singular choice. You either decide to believe in Jesus or not. Faith, it seems to me, is much more dynamic than that, incorporating both belief and doubt, obedience and rebellion, challenge and affirmation, questioning and assurance. It is not merely about a singular choice we make, but all of our choices together. We cannot just choose God once; we must commit to choose again and again and again. But even so, the assurance of faith, the basis of our identity is not so much in what we choose, but in how we reflect that God has chosen us. With apologies to the author of our next hymn, our assurance is not in making Jesus ours, but in knowing that through Christ, God has chosen us, and God is still choosing us. And the good news of the Gospel is that God's love is big enough that God doesn't have to choose between us.

And so it is with great joy and anticipation that we receive and welcome others as they join us and together we strive to learn more about what it means to be claimed by God and to live into that identity our whole lives long. As I tell all of those who consider joining our community of faith, belonging to our Presbyterian congregation does not require assent to particular creeds of the church. We don't expect to completely agree on matters of theology, social issues or even church matters; but we are covenanting to join together and respond to God. As such, we take the creeds of the church, not as our end goal, but our common starting point. Because they remind us, as Joshua did the assembly at Shechem, of our sacred history, of what God has done for us. They remind us that while our faith may waver from time to time, God's faithfulness to us is our sure foundation and our hope in all that is to come.

Let us pray: *You have claimed us, O God. Thank you for giving us this sure promise on which to build our faith. When our doctrines and decisions do not illumine, but obscure your grace, break through them with your love. Thank you for not giving up on us and for choosing us again and again and again. In response, we strive to offer our decisions as well as our very selves to you that we may more and more reflect your will in our lives and in our world; in the name and for the sake of Christ our Lord. Amen.*