

“We are Witnesses”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 22, 2021
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Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

The Tribes Renew the Covenant

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

¹⁴ “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; ¹⁷ 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; ¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” ²² 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.” ²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

The Prophet Joshua said, “Choose this day whom you will serve”

There is a place in Death Valley known as Dante’s View.

From the perch you have a choice.

You can either look down 200 feet to the lowest point in the continental United States,

a place called Black Water.
Or you can choose to look up to 14,500 feet
and see Mount Whitney,
the highest peak in the continental United States.

From this one spot you can choose to feast your eyes on the highest or the lowest.
It's your pick, my friends.
It all depends, really, on where you look.
It all depends, don't you think,
on whether you embody your covenant with God
to live and look with the eyes of faith.
It all depends on the choices you make.

We make choices everyday about whom we will serve,
how we will relate to one another,
what we will post on our social networks,
what we will communicate,
how we are going to live our lives.

The journey is home.
The choices we make daily make up our daily lives.
How we live each day is how we live our lives.

Trust Jesus Christ to forgive confessed sins,
fill us anew with a Holy Spirit,
and to provide guidance for the choices we make.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

We all make choices.
How do we feel about having our choices questioned?
How do we respond when people push us, challenge us, confront us,
and wait for us to explain our priorities?
This might entail acting like Joshua.

In the Book of Joshua we find the people of God
living in a troubling time...troubling because they made it so.
The people were distracted and disconnected.
They had made a commitment to Yahweh but were,
to use a term attributed to non-practicing Baptists, “backsliding”.
They were worshipping foreign gods
and the God of Israel was lessening in their eyes.
A classic definition of sin is intentional separation;
anything that intentionally separates you from God,
your neighbor, or your self is a sin.

I heard of a pastor who was asked by a member of her church,
“Preacher, do you ever get nervous preaching on sin,

when sitting out there in the congregation are all those experts?”
Ah, you know as well as I
that when we speak of sinful choices and separation from God,
when you imagine a preacher pointing a finger outward,
four are facing right back at this guy.

Back to the Bible.

The Hebrew people were separating themselves
from the ways of God by prioritizing the practices of foreign gods.
Their sin was to distance and disconnect themselves
from their history, identity, and covenant with Yahweh.
God was faithful, God was loving, God was reaching out to have a relationship,
even so God's people were not behaving in a like manner.

To attend to God's character in the Old Testament,
we look to God's own self-description,
a description which emphasizes God's grace: [\[1\]](#)

*The Lord passed before Moses, and proclaimed,
“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and
abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the
thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no
means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the
children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth
generation.” (Exodus 34:6–7)*

God twice mentions what is transcribed in Hebrew as *hesed*,
which is translated into English as “steadfast love,”
Declaring *hesed* as foundational way of being
gives steadfast love a prominent place in God's self-understanding.
To grasp the merciful and gracious nature of God,
we first seek to comprehend God's *hesed*.
The word's etymology [has a] connection with an Arabic word, *hashada*,
which means “come together for aid.”
In the Septuagint -- a collection of ancient Greek translations of Old Testament books -
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the word *hesed* is primarily translated by the Greek word for “mercy.”
Several other words are also used,
including the words for “righteousness,” “grace,” “glory,” and “hope.”[\[2\]](#)

Joshua calls God's people to embody *hesed*,
to claim their inheritance of God's *hesed*,
to remember their covenant to be committed to the way of *hesed*.

Now, this scenario in today's scriptures
occurred very near to the end of Joshua's life.
He was clearly at a point where he may have felt

like he had nothing to lose -- and everything to gain -- for God,
so why not shoot straight from the hip and tell it like it is.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

The story of people of faith choosing to invest
precious time and resources, energy and spirit
in arenas that have slowly but surely taken us away
from a life focused on the Word and will of God
is as old as the Garden of Eden
and as contemporary as this morning's headlines.
Our lesson to learn on choosing to embody our covenant with God
is one to be re-learned and re-practiced, daily, in each generation, each day.

Joshua, the spiritual heir to Moses, pronounced two dramatic farewells.

In Joshua 23 we find the first farewell speech when he lifted up the importance
of absolute obedience to God's command.

In his second farewell, found in the 24th Chapter,
Joshua went to Shechem to perform
a covenanting ceremony with the elders and heads of the families.

With bold forthrightness he bade the whole people of God
to vow their loyalty to Yahweh.
He started by reminding them – and us – how God has acted
in human history to redeem us and save our lives.
The One who created and creates delivered on promises
made to both our spiritual ancestors and to us,
and we should act accordingly with the commitment of our whole selves.

Then Joshua lowered the boom.
He said, *“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.”*

The people responded, *“We will serve the Lord!”*

Joshua said, *“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.”* (Joshua 24: 15, 19-22)

Amazingly, the people appear to have appreciated Joshua’s straight talk.
How about you:

Would you prefer someone to express to you what they think of your choices?

Today we are inundated with coaches,
people with some training and expertise
who encourage clients to push just a little bit further.
We find personal trainers at the gym
and personal coaches for salespersons, lawyers, pastors, and churches.
A friend who coaches überprofessionals tells them,
“You can always do more than you think you can.”

My brother-in-law Robert Brewer is a consultant.
“I don’t tell company leaders what they want to hear,” says Robert Brewer.
“I tell them what they need to do.”

Now in the Bible we encounter a coach named Joshua who holds nothing back.

Imagine being warned that you cannot serve the Lord and other gods,
and if you do, then harm will come to you... at the hands of a jealous Lord!
Imagine being warned that the covenant you make
in this sacred ceremony will bind you forever,
for you are now a witness against yourself
that you have chosen to love and serve the one true God.

No matter what you say, you cannot get away from yourself.
And, no matter what you do, God will never, ever let you go.
God’s steadfast love, God’s *hesed*, holds you tight forever.

You can always be more faithful than you think you can.
Commitment in any age, in any place, in any life circumstance is daunting,
yet here we are, together,
loving and serving and living the Faith as best we can.

Do you find yourself hesitating to make a covenant that is life long?

In a New Yorker cartoon, we see a woman proposing to a man.
“Look, I’m not talking about a lifetime commitment,” she says.
“I’m talking about marriage.” (The New Yorker January 30, 1995)

Joshua addressed the priorities of the people.
He was serious as a heart attack

when he said, *“Choose this day whom you will serve.”*

He calls out to us across the ages on God’s behalf to make a commitment,
and to seal our commitment with a covenant.

He recognized that a covenant made in a public ceremony
is more likely to be honored and kept,
especially one in which there is a degree of accountability
to family and friends and a community of faith.

There are no guarantees,
yet it is nice to know one has a support network.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

This summer Betty and I travelled for the first time
since the word ‘*staycation*’ became a way of life.
We travelled to Iowa to witness Anna and Henry
in their new church and city, in Iowa.
And they are loved, and loving, their home and congregation.

We travelled to NY with a stop in Maryland to see Bethany Apelquist
in her new home and church,
where she, too, is loved and loving her call.

We visited with beloved family and friends we had not hugged in over 18 months,
folks in the Catskills, the Alleghenies,
and on both sides of the Hudson River.

And everywhere we went we saw silos.
Silos attached to barns, silos holding corn, or soy, or wheat.

We also witnessed people attached to silos,
silos holding information, some real, some manufactured,
silos of cults attracting to the ways
of hate and prejudice and self-centeredness.

Americans and world citizens hold fast to their “info silos,”
saying, in effect,

I am beholden to this idea, this position, this perspective,
and I do not want to see or hear or try to understand
anyone else’s ideas or perspectives or interests.

And the danger is we – yes, we – worship at the base of this silo idol of info.

The posted danger sign

warns us that these and other, handy dandy idols
demand our devotion,
demand we isolate, practice separation rather than unity,
demand we insist on being right rather than being reconciled,
slowly yet surely drawing us away
from embodying God’s steadfast love, God’s *hesed*.

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

On our summer travels

we met a family from California that had just been to NYC.

Being Disciples of Christ,

we got into a lively, spiritual conversation

about the love of God,

about steadfast love,

about what does *hesed* look like in action.

The California mom and dad and two teenage sons

shared that they stayed in an apartment and toured the sights of the city.

On their first morning they went downtown on the NY subway.

They noticed that even though the train was crowded,

a woman was sound asleep,

stretched out on a long bench across four seats.

Two men stood in front of her bench, telling her to wake up.

People on the Subway watched.

The two men began to kick the underside of her bench,

telling her to wake up.

She said something to them,

something the California family could not hear

over the noise of the subway.

One of the men reached down, grabbed her around her neck,

and began to choke her.

The father from California hunched his shoulders

and made a move in their direction.

Seated directly across from the woman on the bench and the two men

were four women,

who immediately went into action.

“You may not touch her! Leave her alone! Keep your hands off her!”

They stood up for their sister,

their neighbor in need,

a child of God.

The two men turned and rained down curses on the four women,

but the four faithful souls had won, being successful in deterring them

from the evil they were doing.

The four were undeterred,

telling the two, *“Leave her alone; let her be.”*

When the train pulled into the station

the men left in a hurry,

and the woman on the bench settled back to rest.

The California family breathed a sigh of relief,

and when they shared that story with us,
they said,

“That was God’s hesed.

*What those four women chose to do,
that was hesed.”*

Clearly, clearly they had chosen that day whom they would serve.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.

[\[1\]](#) Will Kynes, C.S. Lewis Institute, 2010.

[\[2\]](#) Will Kynes, C.S. Lewis Institute, 2010.