### “My Words Are Spirit” Steve Finlan for The First Church, August 25, 2024

**Joshua 24:1–2, 14–17**

1Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders . . . and they presented themselves before God. 2And 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. . .

14 “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness . . . 15Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve . . . 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; 17for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

**John 6:58–66**

58 “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever” . . .

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61Jesus . . . said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe” . . . 66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

Thank you for coming to church today. To come to church takes a commitment. It may take you out of a comfort zone into a place where you have to interact with a lot of people. That may be easy or hard for you, but either way, it’s making a commitment. Today’s scriptures are going to talk about commitments.

First, let’s talk about who Joshua was. He was Moses’ successor. His role was like that of a field marshal, a chief justice, and a prophetic teacher. Here we see him in that third role, as the one to challenge the people’s faith. This passage is after the Israelites have retaken most of their ancestral lands in Galilee and Judah. Joshua has grown old, in fact, he is 110 (24:29). Joshua is focused on helping people to re-settle the land and to renew their covenant with the Lord. The journey to their new home has been difficult, and they are now at a turning point. They are about to begin a new chapter.

Joshua warns them that they should not serve the gods of their non-Israelite neighbors, who are nearby in the land. They see and talk with these people, and have trade relations with them. Joshua is worried that they may grow too close to these people and stray from their own faith. In our reading, he has gathered the leaders of all the tribes to the city of Shechem, and he confronts them to warn them.

He challenges Israel to choose the Lord over the old gods of Mesopotamia and the gods of their new neighbors, the Amorites. The people accept Joshua’s challenge and pledge their loyalty to the “Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt” (24:17). 800 years later, when Abraham journeyed to the land of Canaan and learned about the one Lord, he repudiated the gods he knew before back in Ur. In a way, the people are repeating Abraham’s decision. They are leaving behind any gods they might have acknowledged while in Egypt, and are re-committing to the Lord alone. This is an important promise, and restarts the covenant now that they are back in the land of Canaan, or Israel. It is a renewal and re-commitment to Abraham’s covenant.

After we read of Joshua’s challenge, we read of Jesus’ challenging his apostles to think spiritually rather than materially. There is a certain correspondence to these two challenges, even though the cultural and religious settings are very different. The tribes of Israel are just beginning to re-commit to monotheistic belief and worship. The disciples of Jesus are already committed to monotheism, but not all of them are committed to Jesus. Some are committed but only in a very materialistic way. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus had walked away from a crowd after they had attempted to “take him by force to make him king” (John 6:15). Some of the apostles may have supported this effort, before Jesus literally walked away from it.

Materialistic versions of monotheism are no better than polytheism, since people are really making an idol, not out of clay, but of political power, and fooling themselves about being servants of God. The people who wanted to make the spiritual Messiah into a material king were serving their earthly desires and ambitions more than they were serving God. The Jewish people were fairly unhappy under Roman rule, and here was a man who many felt could lead them into freedom. But Jesus’ teachings are for *spiritual* freedom.

Jesus challenges his disciples to *discern* the difference between spirit and flesh, to recognize that his mission is a spiritual one, and has nothing to do with fleshly power or a material kingdom. Some of his followers break away and cease to follow him, once they hear this challenge. In my opinion, Judas should have broken away at this point, since he seems to have been committed to the political idea. But Judas stayed in the group, although he was disappointed and discouraged by Jesus’ focus. When Jesus said “among you are some who do not believe” (6:64), he could have been thinking of Judas, as well as of those others who did break away at this point.

For us, also, life is full of turning points, some of them subtle. Try to be alert and aware when they come. When you reflect back on your life’s journey, you may realize when those turning points were.

Again, believing for the wrong reason or upon the wrong basis, is as bad as not believing at all. Jesus even challenged the idea that the Messiah could be called the son of David (Matt 22:42–45). “Son of David” was too nationalistic and militaristic for Jesus’ taste.

It is important that we recognize that his teachings are spiritual and for eternal life, and not fleshly and for earth life alone, although he often gives guidance for our daily lives. His teachings convey the highest truths that hold true in all cultures and for all relationships. His teachings cover the far-reaching goodness and hospitality that are offered to all nationalities, to men and women, old and young, those of high status and low status. He warned his followers not to desire status, not to seek out the highest seats in the synagogues (Mark 12:39), not to embrace materialistic goals.

In some ways, his challenge resembles Joshua’s as the Israelites settle into Canaan, but Jesus is warning them not to pursue the materialistic and status-hunting goals of their neighbors. Also, in the broad, epochal view of things, Jesus, whose Hebrew name *is* Joshua, is also a successor to Moses. There was the revelation of Moses, which held sway for fourteen centuries, and then there is the new revelation of Jesus, which will be this world’s most important revelation for all time.

So he asks us: whom shall you serve? God or yourself? Permanent truth or temporary and earthly power? Real ideals of spiritual worth, or earthly goals of just getting ahead socially? Will we be ambassadors of God, or will we only be looking out for number one? Will we learn lessons about love and loyalty from Jesus’ life, or will we amble on aimlessly through life? Always seek the higher goals.

Faith can empower you through almost any line of work. Bono and the other members of U2 speak about their faith in many of their songs. In “Wake Up Dead Man” Bono sings “Jesus, Jesus help me, I’m alone in this world. Tell me, tell me the story, the one about eternity, and the way it’s all gonna be.” In “Vertigo” he sings “I can feel your love teaching me how, Your love is teaching me how, how to kneel.” And again, in “Mysterious Ways,” he sings, “If you wanna kiss the sky better learn how to kneel (on your knees, boy).” Their lyrics are not always sunny and optimistic. They deal with dark emotions and heartbreak and unhealthy relationships. Like the psalms, their works cover a range of human experience, including faith, the need to “kneel.”

Our Joshua and John readings talk about our need to kneel, to pray, to put spiritual things first. That’s what we’re here to do, to remind ourselves to *keep* doing. Remember to keep searching for the spiritual meanings of Jesus’ words, to make them *your* guide. You are lucky that you can read his words, and take them in. They will be a light on your path, and a warmth in your heart. Be filled with the joy of the Father’s love for you.