

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**November 8, 2020, The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Pentecost / The 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25, Matthew 25:1-13

**Choose!**

### INTRO TO OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

This morning's Old Testament Lesson is from selected verses of Joshua 24. Following Moses bringing the Israelites to the Promised Land, Joshua took over as their leader. In this morning's reading, the Israelites have settled in the Promised Land. Near the end of his life, Joshua calls them to once more name their complete commitment to being followers of the one true God. This is the passage where we get the statement: "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

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I'd like to begin this sermon with a disclaimer. This morning's reading from Joshua about voting for God was not something I chose for this day as we wait for election results. Or at least we are waiting for election results as I wrote this sermon. This is the lectionary reading assigned for this 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time.

But maybe it is fitting that this morning we come to an old story about making choices. Or maybe we could say it is an old story about voting for how we choose to live our lives.

Joshua was nearing the end of his life. He had travelled with the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land. When Moses was not allowed to enter the Land, Joshua became the leader of the people. He led them during the first decades of conquering and settling into the Promised Land. The beginning of Joshua chapter 23 says that when: "the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies all around, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all the people of Israel."

In chapters 23 and 24 we are listening to Joshua's farewell speech to the Israelite people, and his invitation to them to commit themselves again to follow God.

He begins by reminding the people of all that God has done for them, going back to the beginning when God called Abraham and his family to leave Ur of the Chaldeans in the land "beyond the Euphrates" and travel to the land of Canaan, when God promised that Abraham and Sarah would become parents of a large nation. He reminds them of God's faithfulness to Isaac, Jacob and Esau and to Moses. And God's faithfulness to them when God led them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. In a few short verses we have hundreds of years of reminders of God's love and faithfulness.

Some of the reminders are from their people's history of faith, some of the reminders are from their own history of wilderness wandering, and arriving at their new home in the Promised Land.

In each of these stories they are reminded that their lives and their land are gifts that God has given to them. They wouldn't be where they are, or who they are, without God.

See: Interpretation Bible Commentaries: Creach, Jerome F.D., *Joshua*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003, p. 129, Israel "owed its very existence to God."

Then Joshua calls them to the vote, or the choice; he invites them into their polling place. He says its time to name again that you will serve God, and God alone. He tells them: You need to make sure you have gotten rid of the idols and false gods that your ancestors worshipped and served back beyond the Euphrates, and the false idols and gods that the people of this land worship and serve.

But, he says, it is up to each of you, who it is you will serve. They are then called to vote to honor God and serve God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. But, Joshua says, if they can't choose God, then they should name the idols they will serve and vote for them instead.

Then he speaks the words that now decorate mugs and posters and magnets (and our banner this morning): You may choose those other false gods and idols, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (v. 15)

The people's response to Joshua's question is clear; they remember what God has done for them. They name the ways that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, God did miracles in the wilderness wandering years, protected them, drove away their enemies and brought them to the Promised Land.

They vote with the words: "Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for the Lord is our God." (v. 18). They say with Joshua, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

This morning, this story from Joshua invites each of us into the polling place for an important vote about who we will serve. While we may have answered this question many times before, today's story invites us to answer the question again. Who do we vote to follow with our lives?

Who will we follow with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?

So, today I invite you, in your imagination, to walk into a voting booth. Imagine it's the old-style voting booth where you can close the long curtain behind you, so you know that you are alone, and have time to think.

Now, letting this story from Joshua guide us, I invite you to take time to think about where you have seen the faithfulness of God in your life and the lives of those you love. There is no rush in *this* polling place. You can take as long as you like, to think and remember.

Are there Bible stories that have become part of your story?

Are there times when you were in the wilderness and God led you to a new place?

Are there times when you have seen God's hand in your life or the lives of someone you love?

Are there times where you were under attack and God intervened?

Are there friends and relatives whose stories of faith show you what faith in Christ looks like, and that has shaped your own journey?

Are there times in the life of this church, or other churches that are a part of your story, that have shown you God's love?

Are there times when you knew great sorrow in your life and God's Spirit comforted you?

The Israelites recited their stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah and they saw God there.

Whose stories do you tell yourself because they help you understand who God is?

Whose stories show you the love of Jesus?

Are there times when you knew joy, thankfulness, gratefulness in God's presence. What was happening in those times? How did you know God was there?

Are there memories from your Confirmation, from your baptism or the baptism of your child, Bible Studies you've been in, Youth Group, a special Sunday or worship service that you look forward to each year, that show you God's faithfulness?

What milestones in your own life of faith remind you of who God is in your life?

What helps you know that you wouldn't be where you are, or who you are, without God in your life?

Take as much time as you need to remember and reflect on the ways you have seen the love and faithfulness of God in your life.

Now, in your voting booth, look down at the ballot in front of you. At the top of the ballot you see the only question on the ballot: "As for me and my house we will serve \_\_\_\_\_", and there is a blank waiting to be filled in.

The first name on the ballot is God.

But then you look down the ballot, and this is where each of our ballots may be a bit different. Below God's name you see the names of false gods and idols that may have crept into your life and faith.

This may seem like old fashioned language for us, but maybe as you look at that list you begin to see those places, and those people, and those things that get most of your time, and a lot of your heart, soul, mind and strength.

You may look at your list and see parts of the culture around you, that have become false gods you follow.

Your idols and false gods may be other people's beliefs and values that have somehow become your own beliefs and values, that get now get your devotion.

Your ballot may have idols and false gods that bring you sorrow, or even shame.

There may be people's names who have become like idols and false gods to you.

There may be physical things on your ballot that have a hold of you; things that you own, that actually own you.

Take a moment and let yourself see the false gods and idols that are on your ballot, that are claiming some of your heart, soul, mind and strength.

It is because of God's love for you that you can let yourself look carefully at this part of your ballot.

Now think again about your first list of the ways you have seen God's faithfulness and love. Who are you, and where are you because of God's presence in your life?

Let that list and the list of false gods and idols sit side by side for a moment.

With Joshua and the Israelites, we are invited to vote today. You can stay in the imaginary voting booth as long as you like. You can leave the booth and come back to it if you need to.

Give yourself time to think about who you are serving and following and why.

Who and what will you serve with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?

When you are ready, then it's time to vote.

How will you answer the only question on the ballot?

"As for me and my house we will serve \_\_\_\_\_."

When you are ready pick up your heart and answer...