

“Choosing Whom to Serve”

November 23, 2014

Ancestors in Faith series

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Do you know where these words come from? Bob Dylan. Every time I read this passage from Joshua, I think of Dylan's word. He's right. We have to serve somebody. We have to choose.

The Israelites have been on a journey. And it goes way back to Abraham who had followed where God called him to go. Along the way, there were problems. They weren't always faithful. They have rebelled against God, doubted God's promises, and been afraid.

But God has been faithful no matter what. Now Joshua stands on a hill and speaks to the twelve tribes of Israel. He's loud enough for everyone to hear. Joshua reminds them that God has kept those promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even after they were slaves in Egypt, even after 40 years in the wilderness. God has helped them get to the Promised Land. They have conquered the land and have settled there now. God is the source of their success.

They've experienced God's faithfulness firsthand, so what now? Now God calls them to be faithful. God calls them to renew their covenant with God. Joshua tells the people literally to “serve God with integrity and faithfulness.” Not just faithfulness, but even integrity. He tells them to put God first again.

But even after they pledge their faithfulness, Joshua pushes them to really think about it and even warns them not to be so quick with their enthusiasm. This commitment to God isn't something to be overconfident about. Are they ready to make the commitment to God? Are they certain of what they're pledging? Do they know what it means to be loyal to God? They celebrate God's faithfulness to them in the past, but what will happen in the future?

What does saying “yes” to God really mean? For them, it means loyalty. It means total loyalty. It means turning away from other gods completely – gods who hadn't shown faithfulness – and devoting themselves to their one God – who had cared for them and helped them. And it's different than it was. God is with them and has been all the way.

Saying “yes” means putting away idols. It means “inclining their hearts to the Lord.” It means putting God first again and worshipping God alone. When I say “yes” to God, that “yes” means I am also saying “no” to something else.

As we’ve focused on our ancestors in faith, we’ve been invited to reflect on God’s faithfulness to us. And we hear Joshua’s words: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” What does it mean to put God first? Are there images and idols that tempt us to waste our time and money? What hobbies have become obsessions for us? What have we allowed to take over our time?

There are always forces at work to undermine our commitment to God. The Israelites have been nomads – wandering through the land – and now God calls them to settle down. They have been tribes united by war with other nations, and now God calls them to worship God alone and show their faithfulness as they live together. They have been through times of unfaithfulness, and Joshua is sure it will happen again.

We can be lured into worshipping other “gods” and relying on work, money, education, family, status, to give us help and security. All of those are important, but where do we find true security, hope, and help?

We get caught up in the fears of the day, and sometimes those preoccupations take our attention away from God’s goodness. We are tempted to go other ways and put our faith in other things, but our idols cannot prove to be faithful like our God. We have those moments of God’s faithfulness breaking into our lives – sometimes when we’re desperate, and sometimes when we’re celebrating. And God calls us to put away whatever it is that doesn’t nurture or deepen our relationship with God.

The Israelites could be drawn to the gods of other people around them. Or they could be stuck still thinking about the way it was on the other side of the Jordan before they came into the Promised Land. But it’s different now, even though God is still with them. They have to think differently about their relationship with God.

As we celebrate baptism today, we claim again that God is not limited to time and space. Our God is eternal. God has been there throughout time and history. God has gone before us, and God is with us. God knows the names of these boys and knows our names. God cares about all of us. And God keeps promises and invites us to be in relationship.

The promises we make are not trite or small. There’s always temptation. Following God is not an easy road to travel. It takes vigilance. It takes our time and energy. Church growth researcher George Barna has said, “Christianity has no cost in America. We’ve made it too easy to be ‘born again’ - perhaps much easier than Jesus intended.” The challenge from God’s Word is to pledge our loyalty and service to God – not because God requires it of us, but because we can respond to God’s grace

Baptism is a response to God’s grace. It is a choice of these parents, but it’s also a celebration about God’s love for Jack, Eli, and Elijah. We’re acknowledging the love of

God that we've known all along, but we're also making a promise to be a family, to help each other, to pray for each other, and to care about each other.

In our home, we have a picture that includes this verse from Joshua: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." It's a witness to faith, but it's more than some words on a picture. We can't discount what's happening for the Israelites. Joshua calls the people to choose who God is for them, and if they choose to pledge their loyalty to God, then they need to be firmly committed. What's at stake here is how we keep on claiming God's promises even when life changes - whether it's a struggle or a joy - how do we keep on choosing to serve God every day?

Friends, we are bombarded with choices. Here are a few examples: if you have cable, how many stations do you flip through? When you get ice cream, how many flavors are there to pick from? And every day, we can choose integrity over popularity. We can choose godliness over gain.

Joshua's imperative is "choose." God wants the people to be different people than they were before. And that's what a journey of faith is.

When it comes to faith, we always choose. Even not to choose is to make a choice, isn't it? Joshua doesn't say that serving no one is an option. We always make a choice on our loyalty – on whom we will serve.

Over the past few weeks, we've made faith commitments of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Today we're invited to reaffirm our baptism as we witness children being baptized. We're reminded of how faithful God truly is. And God expects us to keep the commitment that we make.

The Israelites promise to serve and obey God. If we read on, we learn that Joshua lay a stone near a tree as a memorial at Shechem to remind the people what they had promised to God.

Friends, as we witness baptism, as we make promises that matter to God, these families, and this church, I pray that we're excited for what God is doing in their lives. I pray that we're challenged, too, to serve God with integrity and faithfulness. The invitation still stands: "Choose today whom you will serve." What a difference that choice makes!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.