

Choose This Day! (Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13)

I don't know about you, but I was more involved in this last election than in any other election in my voting lifetime. I think that most of us Americans found this to be true. We were passionate about this election because we understood that there was so very much at stake. In recent years, the rich have gotten richer, while the middle class has been disappearing. Our automobile companies, which once served the world, have failed to keep pace with those in other countries, and as a result are now losing seven billion dollars a day and begging the federal government to bail them out. Record number of Americans have lost their homes. Record number of Americans have no health care. Ten million Americans are out of work. Our banking system is no longer the international standard; in fact, most of our banking system now rests in the hands of the federal government. Our educational system is something like 20th in the world. We're involved in two wars. Yes we Americans understood how much was at stake. And, as a result, we took very seriously the choice we were privileged to be able to make in this election. We didn't want to make a wrong choice.

There was a similar thing going on in our Old Testament lesson for today. Instead of getting a new leader, though, the Israelites were losing an old leader. Joshua had been with the people as long as anyone could remember. He had been one of the 12 spies sent into the Promised Land way back when Moses was leading the people. Joshua and Caleb were the only spies who believed in God's power to help the Israelites conquer the Promised Land. The other 10 spies said that they were like grasshoppers compared to the people they would have to fight to take over the Promised Land. Because of their lack of faith in him, God said that they would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land until the whole generation died off—everyone, that is, except Joshua and Caleb. And so, 40 years later, after everyone else had died off, it had been Joshua who replaced Moses—Joshua who led the new generation of Israelites into the Promised Land—Joshua who helped the new generation of Israelites conquer the Promised Land. How scary it must have been for everyone to think of losing Joshua. But in our scripture lesson for today, Joshua was giving his farewell speech.

And Joshua wanted the people to understand that they were at a crossroads. He wanted them to know that they had a choice to make. Now that the land had been conquered, now that they were no longer under his military leadership, they would have to decide themselves how they were going to live, whose leadership they were going to follow, to whom they would give their loyalty.

At this crossroads, Joshua began by directing their attention to where they had been. He stressed how God had brought them along the road they had traveled, freeing them from cruel bondage in Egypt, making a way for them in crossing the sea, feeding them with daily manna from heaven, giving them the 10 Commandments. What Joshua was doing was reciting salvation history. He was lifting up all the ways in the past that God had saved them. Joshua pretty much said, "This is who you are suppose to be—God's people. Look how he has loved you and cared for you."

But, as Joshua knew and as we all know, when a child's love is forced, it doesn't mean much to us as parents. God wanted the people to freely enter into a covenant of trust and love with him. And so at this crossroads, Joshua lay before the people this humongous choice. Joshua told them that in the new land, there was a smorgasbord of gods and goddesses to choose from. They could worship the baals or Astarte or Mardoch, or the petty gods of the Amorites, the Hivites, the Jebusites. They could worship the gods of the Egyptians. They could choose the old gods of their ancestors, those gods Abraham had worshiped in Ur before he head Yahweh's call. They could even choose to worship several of the gods, like most other peoples of the day did, to play it safe.

But Joshua made it clear that for him the choice was a no-brainer. Joshua said, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." And, in the end, the people said to Joshua, 'The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.' So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem." (Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25)

When our secretary Deb was typing today's scripture verses for the screen, she commented to me that she couldn't imagine how the Old Testament story was connected to the Gospel story. At first, we do wonder what on earth those scholars who put together the lectionary were thinking. In the Gospel, Jesus is telling another one of his parables, or stories about what the kingdom of God is like. He talks about a wedding. In first century Palestine, a wedding could happen anytime within the range of a few days. The uncertainty of when the bridegroom would actually come was considered part of the excitement. Since the bridegroom tried to catch some of the bridal party napping, fairness required that some sort of a quick announcement be made. So just before the big event, a messenger was sent to shout something like, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming!" The alert ones would be prepared, and the others would be left behind. And in Jesus' story, this is exactly what happened. The messenger came at midnight. It was dark. Some of the attendants awakened to realize that they didn't have enough oil in their lamps.

They tried to borrow some from their fellow bridesmaids, but the wise bridesmaids said, "Sorry. We can't give you some of ours, or we won't have enough to light the way." So the five foolish maidens hurried out to try to find some oil, and by the time they returned, the door had already been closed. They knocked on the door and begged to be part of the celebration, but they were told, "If you belonged at this event, you would already have been present." Jesus concluded, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." In other words, we are to always be prepared for the coming of God and his kingdom.

And so here is the connection to the Old Testament story of Joshua: we need to make the right choice—so that we are prepared, come what may. And the right choice is God. We are to choose to be in covenant relationship with God, bound to him, worshiping him, serving him, living as he would have us live.

And yet, let's face it, just like the ancient Israelites, we have a smorgasbord of choices when it comes to gods or idols that we can worship and serve. We can choose to follow after money, power, popularity, government, self, self-indulgence. But, as Preacher Janice Hearn has pointed out, "Our choices should be determined by where or in whom we place our trust. The reason Jesus so often said woe to those who were rich and well-fed and happy and well liked is that there is danger in these things. There is a danger that we will trust in them instead of in God. There's a danger in holding onto our wallets and hoarding our money and trusting what resources we have...Even for us who have relatively little, there is a danger that we will trust in the things of this world rather than trust in God." ¹

"There's a true story from the sinking of the Titanic. A frightened woman found her place in a lifeboat that was about to be lowered into the raging North Atlantic. She suddenly thought of something she needed. So she asked permission to return to her stateroom before they cast off. She was granted three minutes, or they would leave without her. She ran across the deck that was already slanted at a dangerous angle. She raced through the gambling room with all the money that had rolled to one side, ankle deep. She came to her stateroom and quickly pushed aside her diamond rings and expensive bracelets and necklaces, as she reached to the shelf above her bed and grabbed three small oranges. She quickly found her way back to the lifeboat and got in. Now this seems incredible, because thirty minutes earlier she would not have chosen a crate of oranges over the smallest diamond. But death had boarded the Titanic. One blast of its awful breath had transformed all values. Instantaneously, priceless things had become worthless. Worthless things had become priceless. And in that moment, she preferred three small

¹ Hearn, Janice W., "Making Choices"

oranges to a crate of diamonds."² There are certainly things that we do not need, but surely, God is what we need, for we can put our trust in God in bad times as well as in good, in the present and in the future.

Just like those ancient Israelites, when we look back, we see the mighty deeds of God. We see how he has lovingly and powerfully been not only with our ancestors but also with us--to bring us to this time and this place. Thus, we can trust in his love and power, even when everything else around us crumbles. He wants to be our God, but today, we are reminded that we have to choose to have him as our God—we have to choose to be his people. He's a jealous God. He doesn't want us to worship any other gods before him.

We stand at a momentous crossroads today. This week in the mail we will receive our time and talent and financial commitments for 2009. It's the annual time when we are called upon by our church, as the ancient Israelites were called upon by Joshua, to re-evaluate our loyalty to God and to recommit to him and his church. It's a scary time for most of us now. But, there are events in our lives which have the power to transform the way we look at the world, our lives, and our values. With God's help, the current state of our country could be just such an event. Perhaps it will help us get our priorities straight. Do we have faith that the God who has been with us in the past will be with us in the future? Do we trust him to be with us even if we have to walk through deserts and raging waters?

We were passionate about the election because we understood that there was so very much at stake. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus reminds us how much is at stake with regard to his kingdom and his coming. Like the wise bridesmaids, we need to be sure that we have oil in our lamps. And as Joshua said, we need to be sure that we and our households are choosing the Lord over lesser gods. Thus, may the choices we make in filling out and returning our 2009 financial pledge cards and time and talent commitments reflect that we are making the same right choice as did Joshua, the Israelites, and the wise bridesmaids. Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 9, 2009

² Blair, Brett and Staff, "The Tragedy of The Unprepared Life"