

“Who Will It Be?”

a sermon based on

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

and delivered on

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at

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In the passage from Joshua that we've heard today, we actually have Joshua's last conversation with Israel. If we would have continued reading, the next thing we would have heard is this sentence: "After these things Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred ten years old." (Josh. 24:26 NRSV) I point this out because I think it adds a particular weight to this moment and the words that were spoken.

Joshua, if you remember, had been Moses right hand man. He was the one who waited on the mountain when Moses received the ten commandments. He was the one that first heard the revelry coming from the camp as the people partied around the golden calf that Moses' brother, Aaron, had fashioned out of their treasures so that they could return to Egypt.

When the people first arrived at Canaan, the Promised Land, Joshua, along with Caleb, spoke up and reported the bounty of the land and confidence in God's promise. (Num 14:7-10) When fear overwhelmed the people so that they wouldn't seize what God had promised and were led away to wander the wilderness for forty years, Joshua remained a faithful servant to Moses and the Lord. When Moses died looking out over the Promised Land that he knew he would not enter, Joshua, son of Nun, was beside him and would himself lead the people to claim God's promise.

So, let's go back to this passage again. Shall we? It begins with Joshua gathering the people and recounting the promise that the LORD God made to Abraham. Then... we skipped over a little bit. What we skipped over was an accounting of all the times God has been faithful to Israel and defended them, even though they had so often complained and even been willing to refuse God's promise – more than once.

This is when he says, "Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:14 RSV) Newer translations say, "Now therefore *revere* the LORD,"² But the Hebrew really does translate better as "Now therefore *fear* the LORD," as New Testament scholar, Robert Coote, points out. As he goes on it leads to a better understanding what follows in the sentence: that they serve the Lord with sincerity (or better *with integrity*) and in faithfulness.³

These are important distinctions *fear/revere* and *integrity/sincerity*. Remember, these are Joshua's last words, we're hearing. Whereas reverence means to hold in high regard, fear reminds us of God's power and authority – power that God has chosen for the good of the people even when they didn't deserve it even though...

When Joshua begins this conversation he points back to the gods of Mesopotamia that Abraham left to follow the LORD, (Tradition is that Abraham's father was actually an idol maker, if you remember.) along with the gods of Egypt that kept drawing the people back towards slavery, and the gods of peoples around them who seemed so successful, prosperous, and intimidating. This is when he says,

¹ {Citation}

² e.g. NRSV and NIV

³ Robert B. Coote, "The Book of Joshua: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The Book of Numbers; the Book of Deuteronomy; Introduction to Narrative Literature; the Book of Joshua; the Book of Judges; the Book of Ruth; the First and Second Book of Samuel*, Nachdr., The New Interpreter's Bible, general articles&introduction, commentary, reflections for each book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books; in twelve volumes / [ed. board Leander E. Keck ...]; Vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 1999) 715.

“And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Josh 24:15 rsv)

Who will it be? Will you follow the God who has been abundantly faithful even when you deserved punishment? Or will you continue to hedge your bets by following all of these other gods who don't even proclaim to be merciful but who act arbitrarily and capriciously?

We need to remember that even in Israel, these chosen people, were worshiping other gods. Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, stole her father's household gods when Jacob was returning back to the promised land. We hear time and time again how the people would intermarry and then welcome into their homes their in-laws idols. That was one of King Solomon's downfalls.

But Joshua hear says, “Choose.” Not only to serve the Lord in fear, but integrity. Remember how I said that translation makes a difference? Sincerity implies good intention. I really mean it. Right? But integrity requires follow through. Integrity means actually acting on your intention even when it's hard. That healthy fear of what could happen and what one deserves helps inspire action rather than good intention.

Now let's face it, for us this conversation about choosing which god to follow sounds strange. Doesn't it? We've chosen to follow the God of Israel revealed in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Right? We don't really consider the existence of other deities at all. Do we? Or at least we wouldn't put that sort of name to it? Yet we face challenges of our own.

Back in biblical days, regardless of culture or religion, laws came from on-high, from a king or from a god. They were meant to be followed. We on the other hand, live in a country where the governed get to set the laws. We vote on leaders and referendum. Right? This actually starts to filter into our faith. We might decide that we get to pick and choose which instructions from the Bible and teachings of the church we will follow and which we won't. That's a major conflict in our denomination right now way beyond matters of human sexuality. Like Israel bending their worship of the Lord God to include devotion to other gods, we bend our devotion to God – even with the most sincere intentions – to fit better with what's convenient or what we think we want, instead of trusting that God's reasons for every instruction of Scripture is for our well-being or so that we can be a blessing to more people.

A year or two ago, I came across a post on-line. It came from an advice column called “Ask the Manager,” by Alison Green. This is the letter that he shared on June 28, 2016 (I've taken some editorial liberties for the sake of time):

“I was able to get a summer internship at a company that does work in the industry I want to work in after I graduate. Even though the division I was hired to work in doesn't deal with clients or customers, there still was a very strict dress code. I felt the dress code was overly strict but I wasn't going to say anything, until I noticed one of the workers always wore flat shoes that were made from a fabric other than leather, or running shoes, even though both of these things were contrary to the dress code.

“I spoke with my manager about being allowed some leeway under the dress code and was told this was not possible, despite the other person being allowed to do it. I soon found out that many of the other interns felt the same way, and the ones who asked their managers about it were told the same thing as me. We decided to write a proposal stating why we should be

allowed someone leeway under the dress code. We accompanied the proposal with a petition, signed by all of the interns (except for one who declined to sign it) and gave it to our managers to consider. It was mostly about the footwear, but we also incorporated a request that we not have to wear suits and/or blazers in favor of a more casual, but still professional dress code.

“The next day, all of us who signed the petition were called into a meeting where we thought our proposal would be discussed. Instead, we were informed that due to our “unprofessional” behavior, we were being let go from our internships. We were told to hand in our ID badges and to gather our things and leave the property ASAP.

“We were shocked....”

Alison responds:

“Firing the whole group of you was a pretty extreme reaction, but I can understand why they were highly annoyed.

“Y’all were pretty out of line. You were interns there — basically guests for the summer. Their rules are their rules....

“They presumably have that dress code because, rightly or wrongly, they’ve determined that it’s in their best interest. Sometimes these sorts of dress codes make sense (like when you’re dealing with clients who expect a certain image). Other times they don’t. ... you don’t have enough knowledge as interns to push back so aggressively — knowledge of their context, their clients, and their culture.

“What you could have done was to say, ‘Would you talk to us about the dress code and explain why it’s important? ... We’d appreciate getting a better understanding.’”⁴

Maybe it’s not a dress code, or even thinking that we should get to decide for ourselves which part of God’s instructions make sense to us. But there is a sense that sometimes life would just be easier if we weren’t restrained by what our faith teaches. Isn’t there? I feel like that at times. But the more I’ve studied and asked questions of the Scriptures, (like Alison’s advice), the more I’ve come to understand where things that didn’t make sense to me actually do make sense and reveal God’ love and mercy. Because of that, because if there were ever a time that God didn’t stick to his word{this is a rhetorical comment}... if there were any time that God isn’t or wasn’t true to his word, it’s only when he doesn’t punish us and instead offers mercy. Think about that.

This is the God who became one of us in Jesus Christ and died a brutal death so that he could be true to his word AND withhold punishment. Think about that. Is that the sort of God who gives us instructions willy-nilly, just because he can?

That’s what Joshua was trying to get through to his people. There are so many influences tugging at your hearts and desires and telling you that there’s a better way, but the God who “chose” us, has always stood by us even in our failure. To enjoy that favor though – to really be a part of it – you can’t have divided loyalty. Make up your mind. Who will it be?

⁴ <https://www.askamanager.org/2016/06/i-was-fired-from-my-internship-for-writing-a-proposal-for-a-more-flexible-dress-code.html>. Accessed November 7, 2020.

That's a question for us. When we see the church declining in the global north, too often it's because we have abandoned the integrity of faith, that says, "We will obey even when we don't understand, because we believe that God is good." Integrity matters, even in the smallest things, why would anyone believe the good news that we proclaim about a crucified and risen Lord, if we ourselves don't act like it?

We may not always understand the particulars of why God instructs as he does. That's okay. It's an opportunity to question and to understand if only to be more faithful in putting our faith into perspective. Sometimes, we'll even get it wrong.

Yet this is the God of abundant mercy, who else would it be? AMEN.