

Proper 16 B 2021

August 22, 2021 :: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 & John 6:56-69

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“Choices, choices, choices!”

Perhaps the most precious gift that God has given to us — that is, besides the gift of himself in Jesus — is the gift of choice. God gives us the freedom to choose the path we wish to follow.

It’s a gift that was announced in Genesis 2, when God takes Adam on a tour of the Garden of Eden, and then says to him: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden” (Genesis 2:16b). What a gift! So many choices! But it’s a gift with some limitations, for the very next thing that God says to Adam is this: “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2:17a). And we know how that worked out. But it’s very much how Peggy and I raised our girls: we’d establish the boundaries within which they could do whatever they pleased. And I think it enabled them to be much more creative in their choices than they might otherwise have been.

In any event, in two of our readings this morning — from Joshua and John’s gospel — we heard stories about the sorts of choices that certain people had to make in their spiritual journeys.

Our reading from Joshua describes how, one day, Joshua calls together all of the leaders of Israel. He reminds them of all that God had done for them. He reviews their establishment as a unique people under Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reminds them how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and provided for them in the wilderness, and supported them as they took possession of the Promised Land.

And this is where our reading picks up, when Joshua then tells those assembled leaders that they need to encourage the people under them to be more faithful to God, and that they need to make a choice. And that's when Joshua uttered those famous words: "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

And in our reading from John's gospel, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, where he says to those gathered, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." And we talked about this last week, didn't we? And so, we're not entirely surprised that some of those who were followers of Jesus turned away from him.

So, in brief, what we have here are two stories about people choosing whether or not to follow God. And those choices take place in the context of new information being given to them. So, what can we learn from these two stories?

Well, that Joshua had to raise the question, of which god the Israelites would follow, seems to suggest that, despite God's successful track-record with those people, there was still some uncertainty among the them.

And I think it's likely that any uncertainty was due to the fact that, at that time, many people still clung to the belief that the gods — and make no mistake, they believed in a multiplicity of them — that the gods were limited by geography. That the god of this mountain here was different from the god of that mountain over there. And the god of these plains, that we're now crossing, is different from the god of those plains across that river. And so, as we're entering this new land that God has given to us, why wed ourselves to a god who might not be available to us because we left his territory a while back?

And so, Joshua has to lead these people into a new understanding of God. That their God was *not* limited by

geography. That their God stayed with them wherever they went. And in fact, there was no place where their God was not. And the text of the reading from Joshua seems to suggest that this new understanding was embraced by all the people. So, good for them!

However, when Jesus brings to light a new teaching, a new understanding of God at work in the world — that “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” — this new teaching was *not* universally embraced, and many of his followers turned away from him.

The points that these stories make for us is, I think, first, that the God we worship in church on Sunday mornings is the same God we serve during the rest of the week. And any claims that God makes upon us are not limited by place (like in a church), or time (like on a Sunday morning). That, wherever we go, and whatever we do, we have an obligation to do what God calls us to do, and be what God calls us to be. That’s certainly the point of our story from Joshua.

And the point we take from our reading from John’s gospel is that, sometimes, when we walk with God, God may lead us to a new truth about how we are to live our lives, or to a new

understanding about how God operates in this world. And if today's reading from John's gospel is any indication, some of those new things that God leads us into, are things that might challenge us, or make us feel uncomfortable, or even offend us.

However — and before I pass judgment on those who turned away from Jesus — when I consider my own spiritual journey, and the things I have believed through the years; if I'm being honest, a lot of those things have changed. Sometimes dramatically. And I imagine the same can be said for a lot of you. And that's okay, because it means you're in good company. Because the Bible does not present us with a unified systematic theology about God — that is, it doesn't provide us with the definitive, all-encompassing description of God — but rather, and more, it provides us with a description of how the beliefs of the People of God have changed through the generations. And that's because, every now and then, we discover something new about God. And every now and then, God reveals something new about himself to us. And those things can change how we look at God, and at the world, and at the people around us. And we have to decide how we're going to respond to this new information. And that's essentially what's going on our readings from Joshua and John's gospel.

But here's the thing: God doesn't force us to embrace these new things. I mean, after many of his disciples chose to walk away from him, Jesus didn't call down lightning from heaven to zap them. He didn't curse them, or reprimand them. He simply confirmed with those who stayed, that they really wanted to stay.

A good contemporary example of how people had to choose how to behave, when confronted with something entirely unexpected, was described in a 2003 *Time* magazine article. I'll read to you a portion of that article:

Some cities still carry scars from past blackouts that turned into festivals of looting and despair. But it was clear that we are living in new times, when at 4:09 Thursday afternoon the power flickered and died in the largest blackout in North American history, and instead of exploding, the cities fell quiet. Horns didn't honk. Though there were nasty exceptions here and there, shopkeepers didn't gouge, and windows didn't shatter, and most of the fires were coming off grills. In Toronto, delis and store owners sold bottles of water

for *less* than the usual price; people shared cabs in the city and cell phones at the airport, and one theater company moved its performance out onto the street by the light of a pair of parked cars with their high beams on. In Ohio the *Akron Beacon Journal* printed a special edition of its rival, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ... Modell's sporting-goods company parked two trucks stocked with 2,000 pairs of shoes in Times Square and handed them out to stranded people walking home. [And in] Harlem a group of church ladies in large hats outside a small Pentecostal church set up a card table with cups and plastic pitchers of iced tea and lemonade; they were giving drinks away. (*Time Magazine*, August 25, 2003, pages 31-32)

Truly remarkable! Clearly, God was in those places affected by the blackouts. And people were challenged to move out of their comfort zones by something they never anticipated. And I don't imagine for a minute that most of these people were knowingly

doing what God expected of them; but that's what they did. And for a few hours in northeastern America, people who wouldn't normally associate with one another, did so. Their needs overcame any barriers that might otherwise have separated them. And in a time when they could acknowledge their mutual broken-ness, they were able to reach out to people they never would have before.

This is always been our challenge: that each and every day we look upon the world through new eyes, whose vision has been shaped anew by the Spirit of God. The challenge is being able to let go of things we once believed, and embrace those new things that God is bringing to our awareness and understanding. The challenge is to respond affirmatively to God's call upon our lives, and especially in places, and with people, we wouldn't usually go near.

But this is God's vision for us, his people: that we are mature enough to change when necessary; that we're willing to try and make a difference in the lives of the people around us; and that we comport ourselves in such a way that, in our wake, there is healing, peace, and hope. May we all embrace this vision.

Amen.