Introduction to the text

Today we turn to the final chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua. Much of what we know and believe about God has its roots in these sacred and ancient stories of the Jewish Scriptures. Eugene Peterson wisely points out that God is alive and active, always and everywhere working out God’s salvation plan, and that always happens in individual lives, in specific places, in actual times – in what we call history. God met the Israelite people and God meets us in the ordinary and extraordinary occurrences that make up our daily lives.¹

Much of the Old Testament presents a narrative, a story, and through these narratives we learn who God is and how God is at work in the world. The book of Joshua tells the story of the ancient Israelite people as they finally begin to move into the land that was promised to their ancestor Abraham centuries earlier. The book of Exodus recounts how God through Moses led the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness to learn how to be God’s people. But Moses gets them only to the edge of the land of promise. It is Joshua takes them into the promise land.

This is the end of an era of the Israelite’s history. The journeying to the promise land concludes at Joshua’s death and then Israel moves into the stage of monarchy. Today’s verses are at the very end of the book of Joshua, just before Joshua dies. This is his final grandfatherly speech to all the people of Israel. And Joshua urges them to reaffirm their covenant and renew their commitment to serve God – both as individuals and as a community.

It is not coincidental that Joshua’s final speech takes place at Shechem – the same place where God appeared to Abram long ago and promised the gift of the land.²
Let us listen for God’s word as it comes to us today from Joshua chapter 24, beginning at the first verse:

*Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.*

*And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.*

The assigned lectionary text skips over several verses that remind us that God gave Abraham many offspring, God sent Moses to save the people from slavery in Egypt, God protected them and provided for them in the wilderness, and then gave them victory over their enemies in this new land.

Picking back up at verse 14: ‘Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord alone. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, 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.’

*Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. God protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’* 

*But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.’*
And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, we will serve the Lord!’ Then Joshua said to the people, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.’ And they said, ‘We are witnesses.’ He said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.’ 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.

Sermon

This spring we will offer another Confirmation class to teach and review the foundational aspects of our Christian faith for our 8th grade youth. I imagine we’ll have about ten 8th graders who will go though Confirmation and become full-fledged members of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church.

One of the things that I always stress to confirmation classes at some point in the months-long process is that this is a time to decide for yourself what you, as an individual, believe. ‘I am less interested in you reciting to us what your parents believe, or what you think the church wants you to believe. It’s time for you to decide what YOU believe. What parts of the Christian faith resonate with you, what about Jesus and God do you love? … What parts of the faith tradition are you not ready or willing to embrace? How will you live your life as a disciple of Christ?’

Now certainly, we have all inherited our faith from previous generations, and for the particular faithful people that taught us what it means to follow Jesus, we are and should be ever grateful. For ours is a faith that is lived out and expressed in community. AND, it’s also a faith that we must DECIDE on and we must ACT out in our individual lives.

Sometime in those early teen-age years we start to think critically for ourselves and begin to claim our own faith. And so in Confirmation our young people are given a CHOICE to decide if they are willing to claim for themselves faith in Jesus Christ.

Now none of us every fully comprehends God, but we must decide if we are going to FOLLOW God. We must decide, as Joshua says, if we are going to serve the Lord God, or if we are going to serve other gods. Confirmation is a time that we CHOOSE for ourselves if we will follow God.
Similarly, on his own deathbed, Joshua gathers all of Israel and ask them to make a decision. “Today is the day for you to decide for yourself who you will worship,” declares Joshua. Choose this day whom you will serve! Whether the false gods of your ancestors or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’

And so friends, the charge is also upon us. As the congregation assembled this day, Joshua challenges to us through the generations: Choose this day whom you will serve.

There are other gods. The early biblical writers were quick to acknowledge that folks believed in other gods. Even Abraham and his father served other gods. Joshua knows that there are other gods in the land they now live that will be tempting to follow.

And we also know there are other gods. They take quite different shapes today, but we wrestle with our faithfulness in serving God with single-minded loyalty. There are the gods of our culture that tempt us, just as the gods of the culture tempted the Israelites over and over again so many years ago.

But what are the false gods that tempt us? What keeps us from choosing to serve God, alone?

I imagine many of us are tempted by the false god of security. We have bought into the gods of our culture that tell us if we amass enough financial wealth then we are safe from harm and we can obtain security. Some of us are tempted by the gods of status or power.

Many of us are tempted by the gods of consumerism – the prevailing creed of American society – the one who has the most toys at the end of their life wins. As hollow as it sounds when stated this bluntly, materialism and consumerism are the gods of American society. Especially as they are promoted so fervently in our culture by corporations working to convince us that we need more, more, more of whatever product they’re pushing to make us feel complete or whole. These gods convince us we need newer phones, nicer cars, bigger houses, more toys – no matter the cost we must get more and more things.

Walter Brueggemann is a gifted writer and Old Testament professor and I think his reflections on today’s text are worth repeating:
If you are like me, while you read the Bible you keep looking over at the screen to see how the market is doing. If you are like me, you read the Bible on a good day, **but you watch Nike ads every day.** And the Nike story says that our **value is in our achievements**, and that we must create ourselves.

Brueggemann continues: My wife and I have some young friends who have a four-year-old son. Recently the mother told us that she was about to make a crucial decision. She had to get her son into the right kindergarten because if she didn't, then he wouldn't get into the right prep school. And that would mean not being able to get into Davidson College. And if he didn't go to school there he wouldn't be connected to the bankers in Charlotte and be able to get the kind of job where he would make a lot of money.

Our friends’ story, Brueggemann says, is a kind of a parable of our notion that we must position ourselves because we must achieve, and build our own lives. According to the Nike story, whoever has the most shoes when he dies wins.

Joshua says to the Israelites gathered on that day, and he says to us through these pages of Scripture, you cannot serve two gods. **You must make a choice for yourselves.** The tricky thing then and now is that we can **convince ourselves that we can serve the Lord God and also serve other gods.**

In their sin, the Israelites figured, “Well, how about we serve our God, but just to be safe, let’s also dabble with these other gods of our culture. I mean if everyone around us is buying in, then maybe there is something to these other gods.” Unfortunately for us, it’s just as hard now as it was for those ancient Israelites to “put away the gods of the culture that are among you.”

Joshua said it to them here in this covenantal ceremony at Shechem. Several generations earlier, Jacob told his family the exact same thing standing in the same place – “put away the foreign gods that are among you.”

Friends, many people all around us are making the choice to serve the gods of security or status or power or money. There are plenty of other gods, and they can be quite tempting. But Joshua presses us to choose.
Generations later, Jesus puts the same challenge before us – he just puts it more bluntly: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Maybe it’s because Joshua knows how difficult it will be for his people to follow through on their choice that he presses the people on their decision. After they tell Joshua twice “We will serve the Lord”, Joshua responds to the people: “You cannot serve the Lord, for God is a holy God and a jealous God and to serve God means to serve ONLY God.” And for the 3rd time the people proclaim: “We will serve the Lord! We are witnesses that we have chosen to serve the Lord, alone.”

Friends, today we have the chance to witness – to witness to ourselves and witness to the world with our pledges of time and talent and money for next year – that we will serve God alone. And these pledges and the future gifts that they represent then allow this congregation to witness to our faith and to our sole devotion to God by caring for the vulnerable in our community – and not just in our specific community of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church – but in our larger community.

These witnesses of our pledges allow our Mission Committee to say YES to supporting ministries like Helpmate, who help victims of domestic violence right here in Western NC.

The witnesses of our pledges says YES to providing a home for children who have no home, right here in NC through the Black Mountain Home for Children, and in also in Lesotho and Malawi through the Ministry of Hope orphanages.

The witnesses of our pledges help us to witness here in Black Mountain by allowing Swannanoa Valley Christian Ministries to keep the heat on in another family’s home this winter, or to feed a single mother’s children over the weekend when school lunches don’t carry them over.

Our pledges allow us to continue to witness to Jesus Christ here in our town by opening our doors up to children in this community to come to our WeekDay school whether they can afford the modest tuition or not.
Our pledges allow this congregation to witness that God cares about all children. Our gifts witness that not only do we care about our children being educated through our church programs, but we also believe the children in our sister church in Guatemala deserve an education, even if their families’ can’t pay the tuition for public school down in San Antonio, Guatemala.

Our financial gifts and our time volunteering allow our youth to go on youth retreats and mission trips. Both those kids who grew up right here and whose families are familiar to us, and the kid who has never owned a bible and had to ask to borrow one from a friend to complete the packing list – our congregation says YES to all those kids to be down at Camp Grier on a youth retreat right now.

Our pledges allow your church to witness by opening our doors and our programs and our hearts to all those who need God’s love – regardless of whether they are still too young to walk, or whether their family is struggling right now to keep food on the table, or whether they are too old walk anymore.

Friends, We are able to say YES, and witness to God’s unconditional love right here at home and all over the world because of the ways that we witness to God as Lord through our pledges of money and time and energy.

Friends, we have the choice to make: To choose between serving our Creator, who has power over both life and death, or being a servant of the culture that will surely leave us empty, dried up, and lifeless.

Our faith challenges us, Joshua challenges us: Choose this day – whether we are going to serve God of abundance and generosity and overflowing life, or whether we are going to serve the gods of our culture – security, money, status, consumerism.

The choice is ours to make, and we witness with our very lives.

Amen.

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i From Eugene Peterson’s introduction to the Old Testament History Books (Joshua through Esther) found on page 281 of the copy I use of The Message.

ii See Genesis 12:7


iv See Genesis 35:2-4