

We Are Witnesses

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Joshua 24:1-3a; 14-25

The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost — November 8, 2020

Scripture

24 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. 2 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. 3 Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

14 “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 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.”

16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17 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. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 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.”

19 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. 20 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.” 21 And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” 22 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.” 23 He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” 24 The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” 25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

As I was preparing for this week’s sermon, I took a look at your website in order to learn a little about you and your history. I’m sure many of you know that history, forward and backward. But whether you know that history or you don’t, I want you to hear what I learned.

Founded in 1883, through what was then the Presbytery of Lansing, you started with 87 members and installed your first pastor in 1884. Within 30 years you had grown to 700 members and after another 17 you had outgrown your first building. So construction began on the building I'm standing in now on Thanksgiving of 1927. In your first hundred years, beyond just growing in membership, you bore fruit, planting both Pennfield Presbyterian and Westlake Presbyterian Churches, created the First Presbyterian Church Pre-School and built the Retreat Center on Waubascon Road.

You started the Hospital Visitors, joined in serving the Franklin Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen of Battle Creek. A Youth Center across the street from the church, which I saw in my way in, was added in 1996 to provide a safe place for young people in middle school and high school to gather for fellowship and to explore and deepen their faith.

In 2014, driven by your theological convictions—I'm sure you remember this—you renovated your worship space to enhance the usability, flexibility and safety of the building. As a result, you've been able to share your space with several local choirs and artist, celebrating the divine gift of music with the wider community.

Over the years, you've deepened your focus on mission, partnering with agencies to would help build and strengthen families, parents and children, with a concentration on education, healthy relationships and spiritual growth and encouragement. You've invested your time, talents, and treasure in order to join God's work in the "Heart of the City".

Now I wasn't there, I just plagiarized your website. You were there. For at least some of it. Maybe some of you were there for most of it. But I wanted you to hear that because it's important to know your story. How many of you know the story? Do your children know the story? What about your grandchildren and your great grandchildren? They should; it's a good story.

And it's an opportune time to recall your story up to now as you are about to embark on the next chapter in your story.

Your Senior Pastor was honorably retired at the same Presbytery meeting where I was confirmed as ready to receive a call, so I was fortunate to hear some of your story then.

Look at all that God has done. Through you. For you. In you. Thanks be to God for your ministry together.

Last week, at the end of Pat's sermon, you heard what we might call Abraham's commissioning—the guiding text for your 2020 stewardship series—where we learn about all that God promised to Abraham, and where we also learn *why* God made those promises to Abraham in the first place. “I will bless you, and make your name great,” said God, “*so that you will be a blessing*. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*.” You are blessed to be a blessing.

Our Scripture, coincidentally, is about another community on the verge of a transition in leadership. But their leader didn't retire; instead, as soon as he stopped talking, he died.

So this week we have—*quite literally*—Joshua's farewell address, a passage that invites us to look at God's promises to Abraham from another perspective—to look at them in retrospect, with the benefit of generation upon generation of history and experience with the One who made and kept those promises.

The most familiar part of the address, for many of us, is probably the last part of verse 15: “Choose this day who you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” I can't imagine there's any phrase from scripture that has been hung beside more front doors, whether framed or cross-stitched. It's a phrase that evokes comfort, familiarity, and more than a little sentimentality. And it's easy to take it for granted. Of course, we serve the Lord.

But when I read it here, I don't really feel much comfort. It's pretty unsettling. Maybe it made you a little unsettled as you listened. I don't think that's by accident; I think that's by design.

There's a hint right from the beginning that Joshua is not trying to make anyone comfortable. Earlier I said that the address is a retrospective on God's promises to Abraham. It takes place *after* the Israelites have entered and settled in the land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. And so, you might expect that the retrospective would start with the promise. Instead, it starts a generation earlier.

“Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.”

In other words, “You weren't always Yahweh's people. Your ancestors worshipped other gods. You come from idolatrous roots.”

Then came the promise. Then came the story of the promise's fulfillment. And Joshua wanted his people to know their story. Though the lectionary skips it, the story had to be told—it's a story of families and enemies, of inheritance lost and gained, of slavery and deliverance, of wandering in the wilderness so long that sometimes they thought slavery would be better, of a land promised then denied then finally given. It's a story of Yahweh's faithfulness in spite of Israel's faithlessness.

It's a story of military victory upon military victory—over Egyptians and Amorites and Moabites, over Jericho and the Perizzites, the Canaanites and the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and, accordingly, of Yahweh's victory over all of their Gods.

Of the victories, says Yahweh, “it was not by your sword or by your bow.” And of the land, says Yahweh, “I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.”

“In other words,” says Yahweh, “all that you have and all that you are comes from me.”

“So,” says Joshua, “choose this day who you’ll serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

And the Israelites say, “Us too!”

And Joshua says, “you can’t!”

What?!

You can’t. You will inevitably serve other Gods, and that’s just not going to work.

Despite the people’s protest, he wasn’t wrong. We have...literally the entire Bible as evidence. And 2000 years of messy church history on top of that.

John Calvin famously wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that humans are perpetual factories of idols. In a lecture on the First Commandment—the one about having no other Gods—the Swiss reformed theologian Karl Barth said that “other gods” are “all the other authorities which for some reason are thought to be important.”

While Joshua’s listeners could—and probably did—carry their idols in backpacks or put them on shelves and could physically “put them away” as he told them to do, ours are not so obvious, and not so easy to put away. To find them we might have to look at our bank statements, our calendars, our internet search histories, or even our committee agendas and session minutes—all the things that show us where we’ve devoted our treasure, our time, our talent, and our attention. All the things we have loved before and instead of God. All the other authorities which for some reason we have thought to be important.

So, Joshua wasn’t wrong about his people’s propensity to serve other Gods—or ours.

But he was wrong about one thing. I don’t know why Joshua said, “he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.” Maybe because he knew he wouldn’t be around to keep an eye on them, fear would be the most effective substitute.

But we know what he didn't—we know what God has done in Christ. We know that, while we were still in sin, Christ died for us. We know that we have been saved by grace through faith. And we know that this is not our own doing; but rather that it is the gift of God.

And so, while, with the tribes of Israel gathered around Joshua, we can say that we are witnesses against ourselves, we can also say that we are witnesses to something greater.

We are witnesses to the faithfulness of God in Christ that prevails, in and in spite of us. We are witnesses to all that Christ has done and will continue to do.

I want to let you in on a secret. We're pre-recording this sermon. So, while you're joining in to worship on Sunday, November 8, I'm here in your sanctuary on Tuesday, November 3, 2020, also known as Election Day. (Hello people of the future!).

I've got to admit, it feels a little surreal, especially on this week of all weeks, knowing that you know something, maybe several things, that I don't—not just because you're smarter than me, but because you've got a 5 day head start on the news cycle. If you were going to cast your vote, you will have already done so. If you were not going to, well, then you didn't. It's possible that you know who the nation chose as its next president. It's also possible that you know that we don't yet know who the nation chose as its next president.

We have been told that this election would be the most important one in our lifetime. And maybe that's true. Maybe it's even more true than every other election when we were told it would be the most important in our lifetime. Only time will tell.

But whatever happens today, November 3, some things won't change by November 8 or any day after.

Through empires and dictatorships, feudalism, communism, socialism, and capitalism, the Church has not and will not be overcome. That won't change

The God who called this congregation into being in 1883 continues to minister through your hands and feet, Serving Christ through service to others. Connecting people to God through

outreach. Nourishing people in the Spirit through worship, fellowship and discipleship - today tomorrow and every other day. That won't change. Christ is risen — truly he is risen. That won't change.

Whether it's November 3 or November 8 or any other day, the most important choice isn't who we vote for. It's who we serve. To what do we bear witness? To whom do we owe our time, our talents, our treasure, and our attention?

Every day we make a choice to serve the tiny gods that draw us in by novelty or urgency, or to serve the One who Joshua called Yahweh, who Jesus called Abba, and who we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Choose this day whom you will serve. Amen.