

Witnesses Against Ourselves
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Rev. Jeff Allen
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On Tuesday morning of this past week, election day, I was reading a blog on the internet, and the first line said, "If you haven't voted already, this would be a good day to do it!" No matter how you feel about the election, I think we all might agree that we are standing on the brink of a new era in our nation's history. A new chapter in our history book is going to be written. Our text this morning comes at a similar point of change in the Israelite's history.

Remember that Moses brought the people through 40 years of wandering in the desert and led them to the promised land. But Moses didn't make it into the promised land. He turned the leadership of the Israelites over to Joshua. It was Joshua who led the people as they fought the battles that established their presence in the promised land.

Today's text is Joshua's last sermon to the people. They were people he had been with throughout his life. He knew them all, and they knew him. They have finally achieved victory and have settled in the promised land. They're no longer nomads. They're standing on the brink of a new era. Something new and different is about to begin. A new chapter in the nation's history is about to be written.

So what does Joshua say in this important, historic moment? He begins by reminding them of God's hand in their lives throughout their nation's history. How God promised Abraham to make his children as countless as the stars. How God used Moses and Aaron to deliver the people from slavery in Egypt. How God was with them as they fought the battles that gave them their place in the promised land.

Now, therefore, Joshua tells them, since you know that God has been with us throughout our history, you should serve God with sincerity and faithfulness. You should give God your undivided loyalty. Put away any other gods you may be following. You must make a choice. Tell me this day, whom will you serve?

And this was a real choice the Israelites had to make. The land where they had settled down had been filled with people who had a bunch of different gods than they followed. The Israelites had learned about these gods and had begun to follow them instead of God. So Joshua was calling them to a new commitment to God. Whom will you serve? Make your choice this day!

The Israelites chose to serve God, and you'd think that Joshua would be pleased with that choice, wouldn't you? Well, if he was pleased, he didn't show it. No, Joshua pushed back on them, saying "You can't do it; you're not able to worship God." It's almost as if he's saying, "I know you too well. You're not going to hold up your end of the bargain, and God won't like that!"

As I read this passage this week, a scene from the movie “A Few Good Men” kept flashing in my mind. You might remember it, with Jack Nicholson on the witness stand being cross-examined by Tom Cruise. At one point, Tom Cruise shouts, “I want the truth!” to which Jack Nicholson shouts back, “You can’t handle the truth!” And that’s how I’ve been imagining this scene between Joshua and the Israelites. Joshua says, “You’ve got to choose this day who you’re going to follow. Are you going to choose the Lord, who has been with our people for all time, or are you going to serve the gods of the pagans?” The people shout back, “We will serve the Lord!” to which Joshua replies, “You can’t serve the Lord! I know you too well. You won’t follow through on your promise.”

When they heard Joshua calling them out like this, they held firm to their decision to serve God. So Joshua responded by telling them they’d better follow through on their commitment then and put away any other object of worship! One writer put it this way: “you cannot have a little bit of God when it suits you and then do whatever you want until your next big need comes along. God will not tolerate a divided heart or lip service.”¹

One commentary I read this week said that today’s text “has often appealed to preachers, helping to gain this [passage] its place in lieu of nearly all of the rest of Joshua in the church’s common lectionary.”² It may be considered the favorite of preachers because people know we could never get away with a scene like this! It’s certainly not a passage that is highlighted in our seminary’s pastoral care or church leadership classes. Just imagine if Bill or I asked if you were going to choose to serve God, you replied yes, and then we said to you, “You can’t serve God!”

One preacher put it this way. “As a parish minister, I assume Joshua’s role when I invite people to affirm their covenant with God and one another. But I seldom have his courage in the follow-through. If I did, when parents brought their child for baptism, I would ask more than the generic ‘Do you promise to grow this child in the Christian faith and offer him or her the nurture of the Christian church?’ Instead I’d ask, in front of God and the whole congregation, ‘Do you promise to get him or her out of bed, dressed and here every Sunday morning for the next 18 years, even when you’ve had a long week or you’d rather sleep in or there’s a soccer match or when this darling infant has grown into a surly, tattooed teenager who thinks church is ‘dumb’?’”

She continued, “I’ve never been that honest about baptismal vows. I bet Joshua would have been. When people join the church, Joshua would have asked more than a rote ‘Do you renounce the powers of evil and seek the freedom of new life in Christ?’ After the unsuspecting new member said yes, Joshua would have followed with, ‘So when you buy your next car, will you resist all the commercial hype that encourages you to overspend on something that eats up resources and pollutes the air?’”

¹ Jewell, John. “Who Shall We Be...In Light of what God Has Done?”

http://www.lectionarysermons.com/november_10_02Sermon.htm accessed 11/4/08.

² Coote, Robert B. “The Book of Joshua” in *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. II.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) p. 714.

She concluded by focusing on herself, saying, “Had Joshua presided at my ordination, I doubt he would have let me get by with a simple vow to study, pray, teach and preach. He probably would have demanded, ‘Will you give up your personal gods of procrastination, perfectionism and the pursuit of trivia?’”³

You see, it’s not just the Israelites who are faced with this choice. We also have a choice between serving God or serving the gods of this age. Those gods can be a wide variety of things: materialism, self-sufficiency, sex, pride, alcohol, success, pornography, gossip, and the list could go on and on. The bottom line is that we have a choice to make, and we need to make it each and every day. To paraphrase the blog I read this week, if you haven’t made a choice yet, today would be a good day to make one.

Once the decision is made, Joshua tells the Israelites and us that we become witnesses against ourselves before God. In essence, we become accountable before God for our actions. But we don’t really want to be accountable, do we? If I were on trial for my actions before God, I certainly wouldn’t put myself up on the stand. My testimony would help the prosecution more than it would help me! I’d have to plead the fifth!

And that’s just the problem, isn’t it. We don’t always live up to the promises we make to God. The people of Israel made their promise to God in front of Joshua, but as we read the rest of the Bible, we realize how often they broke those promises and how God always offered forgiveness and reconciliation.

So it is with us. We have an opportunity each and every day to turn away from our false gods and to turn to God. God is asking for a radical commitment, but God is also infinitely willing to offer us grace and forgiveness as we try and fail to turn away from our false gods. And so we stand in the balance, always pursuing a deeper relationship with God on the one hand, and always receiving forgiveness from God when we don’t live up to our hopes and dreams for ourselves. In all of this, we stand as a witness to our faith – all too often, a witness against ourselves.

You know that song, “They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love”? I used to think that it was one of the greatest lies in all of modern Christianity. It sure doesn’t seem to be the truth of the Christian witness in general. I mean, do we really think that people look at Christians as a whole and say to themselves, “Boy, you sure can tell that they’re Christians, because they just love and love and love some more!”? Unfortunately, that’s not how we tend to act as Christian people. But over the past couple of years, I have begun to see the song more as a song of infinite hope. Sure, we’re not there yet, but that’s not what the song is saying. It doesn’t say “They know we are Christians by our love” it says “They will know we are Christians by our love” if we can just remember to act in radically loving ways. That is the kind of witness that I believe God wants us to be!

³ Arnold, Talitha. *The Christian Century*, October 23-November 5, p. 18.

We have a choice to make this day – and every day. Will we serve God by loving God and loving our neighbor? That is our call to discipleship.

I think the hymn “The Summons” we sang a few moments ago sums up this call to discipleship and the choice we have to make this day. I invite you to look at some of the words with me. I believe these are the questions God is asking us to consider:

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known?
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?
Will you leave yourself behind?
Will you care for cruel and kind?
Will you risk the hostile stare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?
Will you admit to what I mean in you and you in me?
Will you love the "you" you hide?
Will you quell the fear inside?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around?

These, I believe, are the questions God is asking of us. These questions are God's call to discipleship. Maybe one or more of these questions stand out as particularly meaningful this morning. Maybe one or more of these questions really got you as you heard it. If so, I invite you to circle, underline or highlight those words that stood out. And then take this sheet home with you and pray that God would reveal to you just what God wants to say to you through these words.

If your answer to any of these questions this morning is yes, bear witness to it! Be a witness for God, not a witness against yourself. May it be so. Amen.