

The Choices We Make

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18

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I have the same routine every morning. I eat exactly the same breakfast. I make coffee and pour it in my favorite cup of the day – I rotate them until they get clean – favorite, second favorite, third. I read the newspaper in the same order: Front section, Metro section, Style; glance at Sports. This doesn't vary. I keep this same exact routine so that I'm not faced with any decisions early in the day.

I find it frees my energy to make the decisions that will come around later. Choices are exhausting. By the end of day, I find it hard to make up my mind on anything because I'm just too tired. Remember when you'd go to the grocery store after work and you'd be checking out, paying for your stuff, and the clerk would ask, "Paper, or plastic?" I'd throw up my hands. "You choose!" I was so exhausted I couldn't decide.

I suspect that we are all weary of decision-making these days. After 18 months of living in a pandemic, when we've had to face choices we'd never before imagined, we're all rather tired. We've had to ask: Is it safe to go to work? Is it safe to go out? How strange it has been to strategize our trips to Giant, to Safeway, to Costco. Some have asked, particularly women, "Should I quit my job to stay home with the kids who have to go to school online? What choices do we need to make because of a reduced income?" Medical and support personnel have had to consider, "How can I go to work and still keep my family safe?" Other decisions arose: Do I put off my medical procedure? Do we visit our aging parents? Do we attend that wedding, that funeral? The choices we faced were never-ending.

Here at the church we faced critical decisions: do we close our building? Do we open up to offer child care? Do we reopen for worship? When? How many people? How do we all keep one another safe?

We've all faced so many decisions – choices, some of which, could bring life or death. It's been a really difficult time. And maybe we're a little weary.

Let's add this to the mix. In this age of social media, the decisions we make get judged. Freely. Openly. Everybody's got an opinion.

I was watching the Tokyo Olympics when Simone Biles made the decision to drop out of 5 of her 6 scheduled events. The media storm was ferocious! And I've certainly got my opinion: I applaud this young woman – the greatest gymnast of all time – who chose to protect her mental and physical health over the expectations of

her country, indeed over the expectations of the world. What courage! What amazing courage she has – to choose what brings her life and health and wholeness.

There are daily decisions that I also applaud, and each day as I read their stories and hear of their experience, I give thanks for their courage and dedication. I'm thinking of the medical personnel – doctors and nurses, technicians, staff of all levels who keep hospitals running – who after 18 months of caring for COVID patients still go in to work every day to save lives, to hold the hands of the dying.

We are all so aware of the effects – good and bad – of the choices of people all around us. Choices to get vaccinated, or not, have affected us all. We now are in what's called “The Fourth Wave” of the pandemic, with the delta variant forcing us to make changes and choices once again.

And I'm sure you have been following the drama of mask-wearing with emotions of exasperation and alarm. Who wears a mask? Who doesn't? Who is required to wear a mask? Who decides? School boards and parents and governments and businesses are at levels of retaliation and even violence over these choices.

Yes, the pandemic has revealed many consequences of our choices – choices in public policy, in public health. Decisions about where we place our military, how and when we remove our troops, impact the entire world. Just last week, we learned in a report from scientists that decisions cannot even be made in time to protect the very future of our planet. Day by day, moment by moment – we are impacted by the choices we make, and the choices others make – choices we cannot control.

So how are we feeling: Hopeful? Cynical? Despairing? Exhausted?

When I chose this text from the lectionary for today, I felt inspired by it. Not to put it to you as a finger-wagging: Do or Die! story, but as a hopeful one. I think of it as hopeful, because it shows a moment in our biblical history where people are being called to assess where they are, and where they're going. It's a decision about how they will live as they get ready to enter a strange and unknown future.

Moreover, it's a recounting of God's presence with them and among them: a reassurance that God has been with them in the past and will be with them where they are poised to go.

As we have heard, Joshua, the successor to Moses, has led the exodus of those who had been slaves in Egypt. They have traveled through the desert, journeyed through the wilderness; they have received the commandments of Sinai, become people of the covenant. Now they are preparing to enter the land that God promised to Abraham and Sarah, their ancestors. Joshua has reviewed how God has been faithful to them, providing “protection, guidance, and nurture.” Now they must make a choice. Will they choose Yahweh, “I Am Who I Am?” or will they follow other gods?¹

Something that particularly caught my attention about this text, was the realization that Joshua *knows* that these other gods are incredibly seductive. He is keenly aware of how enticing these alternatives are. John Calvin certainly echoed this when he wrote about the danger of idols - of the human heart as a perpetual idol factory.

This choice that the community is offered is one that is not new to us. It is the one we make every time we gather in worship. Each week, each Sunday, or whenever time we meet for worship, we renew this covenant. It's in our order of worship – our liturgy.

Let's walk through it together:

We begin by being called together. We are summoned, assembled, gathered. Immediately we lift our praises to God, recounting God's generous deeds and how God has been faithful to God's people. If you noticed in the hymnal, the section of songs that our first and second hymns came from is titled: God's Covenant with Israel. We sang "The God of Abraham Praise," with words that told of God's promise that is changeless: The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above, the Ancient of Eternal Days, the God of love!" " We praise you living God! We praise your holy name: the first, the last, beyond all thought, and still the same!"²

The second hymn echoed the first, affirming God's faithfulness in the past that continues on throughout our own present day experience: "Give thanks, and find this story yet our promise, strength, and call, the model of emerging faith, alive with hope for all."³

Let's look at our bulletin again. We moved to the prayer of confession. We confessed who we are and named the lesser gods we follow: selfishness, condemning others, seeing to our own well-being while ignoring the needs of others, being blind to those who suffer. We ask for God's help to turn away from these, to make new choices, to begin again.

As we move through the liturgy, we hear the words of scripture: words of assurance yet words of challenge. Each week, we encounter the call of God, Yahweh, the LORD, to live according to God's expectation for God's people. What does this look like? It's to live with kindness and mercy, with compassion for the stranger, with commitment to socio-economic justice. We are asked to affirm the kind of community we will be, what kind of choices we will make as members of that community. We claim ourselves to live rooted in the example of Jesus, grounded in the way of love, "holding fast to what is good." (Perhaps you'll remember our sermon series: "What does love look like?")

Then, each week we present our gifts to God – we place our own lives in the offering plate, as it were. Those gifts are a sign of our commitment: we choose to serve and

worship the Lord. It is our altar call. Our affirmation. Our choice – both visible and invisible. At the close of the service we are sent out, blessed and charged to serve God in the world, following the pattern of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Every Sunday we renew our promise to God. We say personally and privately, and publically and corporately, that God is indeed in charge of our lives. That God is at work in us and through us, in our past our present and our future.

Friends, you have already chosen. God has chosen you! Through the work of the Spirit, you are here, in person and online. You are here before God and before one another because you know that the LORD has been good, has been faithful and continues to be faithful. You hear the stories of your ancestors from scripture and know that this is *your* story. You know that other gods – selfishness, individualism, self-centeredness, consumerism, voices that say that it okay to exploit the earth and other creatures on it – those gods do not save.

Here we decide again and again that we say yes to a God who frees the enslaved and leads them out of bondage; a God who says protect the poor, defend the vulnerable, welcome the stranger, let righteousness flow like a never ending stream.

Many decisions lie before us. Decisions to be made as individuals, as families and households, as a church body, as a nation, as humankind.

And know that you do not need to choose everything. Learn what is set before you to choose today. As Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote, “There is not a human heart on this planet that can bear all of what is happening right now.”⁴

So find rest as you need it. Ask for help. Try not to let your cup run dry.

We have chosen to serve the LORD. We are going out into the world... wherever, however the Spirit leads and guides and inspires us. May we each and together have the will, the hope, the passion, the energy, the courage to choose the way of life, of love, of service, of welcome and grace.

¹ “Protection, guidance, and nurture” from ON Scripture: Making the God Decision, Walter Brueggeman, 2011 – <https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002f8b/on-scripture-dr-walter-brueggemann-on-joshua-24>)

² Hymn 49, The God of Abraham Praise, Glory to God hymnal)

³ Hymn 50 Deep in the Shadows of the Past, Glory to God hymnal)

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, The Corners. "If You Can't Take it Anymore, There's a Reason", Aug 17, 2021. <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres>)