

Choices

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Stewardship Sunday
November 12, 2017
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Joshua 24:1-5; 14-28

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson - Joshua 24:1-5; 14-28

How much do you know about Joshua, this character in the Old Testament with a book named after him? Today's reading is from the last chapter of Joshua – and it is about the end of Joshua's life. But Joshua's story actually begins many years before in the book of Numbers. Back then, Joshua is one of the 12 spies Moses sends to scope out the promised land- and while 10 spies return with gloomy reports of how the people of Israel will never be able to overtake this land, Joshua and one other spy, Caleb, have faith that God will find a way for them. Well, Moses is not at all happy with the lack of confidence from the majority of the spies - and neither is God- so unhappy in fact that the Israelites must wander another 40 years in the wilderness before they can go into the promised land. But in the midst of this mess, Joshua has made his name as a person of faith and leadership.

And so after those 40 years of wandering, when Moses dies, again with the people at the Jordan River on the border of the promised land- Joshua is appointed the leader of the people. Joshua leads them in and the story of the book of Joshua is told. It's a story of a lot of war - long lists of all the kings and peoples defeated- the Hittites and Amorites and Canaanites and Perizzites and Jebusites and all those other ites; and the story of the culture of the 12 tribes of Israel being established. It is a violent and crucial time. And finally at the end of this book of Joshua, it is a later time - it is after the people of Israel have been established there - a time of relative peace and co-existence with the other peoples. And it is later for Joshua - at the end of his life; and Joshua, much like Moses did, makes a final speech - a final charge and challenge to the people of Israel.

I want to tell you about one of my favorite movie scenes – it’s from the movie “Freaky Friday” which is a kids movie about a Mom and teen-age daughter who get switched into each other’s bodies so that the Mom is the daughter and the daughter is the Mom – and all sorts of high-jinks and hilarity ensues – and then it all works out in the end. But early on in the movie before this switch happens, there is a scene where the Mom drops off her daughter at high school, and as the daughter walks away in the midst of all her friends, the Mom yells out to her daughter in a big cheery voice: “bye honey: make good choices!” – and the daughter shrivels in total embarrassment, as the Mom drives away with a contented smile. It’s every teen’s nightmare – and although as a parent you usually try to be more subtle, you really do want to give a message about making good choices – and no matter what, you will inevitably be an embarrassment to your teenager.

It seems to me that there are some “make good choices” moments that we have before us today – it’s something of what is happening in the story we heard today from Joshua, as he talks to them about choosing to serve God faithfully. And although it is quite different from the movie scene I described, if we can be a bit playful with it, I think you can see a bit of humor in the back and forth between Joshua and the people:

Joshua says “serve God – but you don’t have to serve God – but my family, we will serve the Lord”

The people say: “we will certainly follow God; God’s with us, and we’re with God”

Joshua says: “you can’t serve God – it’s too difficult and you’ll just make God mad”

The people say: “no, we will serve the Lord!”

Joshua says: “Well OK – but put away other gods - and turn your hearts to the Lord”

The people say: “We will serve the Lord”

And a covenant is made – the people are renewed in commitment and faithfulness to God.

“Make good choices” – it’s in scripture, and it can also be seen in what happened here today with the baptisms that we celebrated, for Caroline and Lucy. Scott & Stephanie and Joe & Megan are at that wonderful point as parents when they cannot yet be an embarrassment to

their children – that time will come soon enough – but baptism is very much about choices – for these parents and for their children. And I was thinking that the baptism liturgy actually has a bit of an echo in it of that back and forth between Joshua and the people:

The liturgy says baptism is the way of faith for the church.

The Elder says – these parents want to have their children baptized!

The liturgy says – well wait, you better answer some questions – this is a big commitment – lasts a lifetime!

The parents say – we’ll certainly answer these questions – we’re committed for life!

The liturgy says – OK, but I still think you need some help – we better ask all these people too!

The congregation says – yes! – we’ll help – we’re committed for life too!

The liturgy says – OK, good, but we better pray first! – incline our hearts together to God.

And then the baptismal covenant is made – a renewal of faith and faithfulness to God.

“Make good choices.” That’s happening in Joshua; that’s happening at Hope Church today – that’s good. But there’s something else happening too – another choice that is going on in both Joshua and in baptism that I want us to notice and explore – and that is about God choosing. That’s actually where both the Joshua story and the baptism covenant begin, with God choosing – and I think that how we hear and understand that is very important today, because what we see in the choosing God does will shape profoundly how we see the choices that we are to make.

Do you recall how that Joshua story begins? As Joshua gathers the people, he offers a word from the God that goes something like: “way back I chose Abraham from another land beyond the River, and brought Abraham to Canaan and blessed his generations”; and then we also hear of God bringing Israel out of captivity in Egypt. Abraham and Exodus are all about focusing on God’s choosing as the foundation for the people of Israel to serve the Lord. And that same kind of choosing from God is reflected in the baptism liturgy:

For you Jesus Christ came into the world; for you Christ conquered death;
All this God did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet.
We love because God first loved us.

Being chosen by God – that’s good – for Israel, for us; but it’s also where things get a little complicated, even dangerous. Because as the choice of God for a people is described in Joshua, as the choice of a God’s love for a child is described in baptism, the choice is not meant to call attention to Israel, or to these children, but to call attention to something about who God is: that God makes God’s self known as bringing life and freedom and purpose into this world. But what often happens is that those who are chosen start to think that it’s about them - being chosen becomes internalized as a sense of superiority, and bad things happen. People claim God being on your side; it leads to religion and faith being about looking out for your own while diminishing others.

When that happens, it’s a problem – we know that. But here’s the thing – the dynamic of being chosen over against others IS a dynamic present when you read the Joshua passage. If we look honestly at the storyline through Exodus and into Joshua and Judges, there is a thread in which the people of Israel are spoken of as elevated in importance and worth over any others. It’s important that we don’t just gloss over that, but acknowledge that such a theme is present. But as we do that, what we can also see is that even in that time there was an ongoing tension within and against that viewpoint. We hear that tension in different ways: in this story, Joshua very clearly says this is not about their superiority but about their need to look to God; and then throughout Hebrew scripture we hear stories again and again of people outside of the Israel circle as models of faith. In fact, we hear so much internal critique in scripture of that thread of superiority, that there emerges a whole other thread to be seen, which is of the blessing of God given for all peoples. From the very start when Abraham is called: ‘all nations will be blessed through you’ - to the call of the prophets for Israel to be a light to the nations – to the vision of a time of peace for all peoples – there is a thread which says that to be chosen of God is to be a bearer of God’s blessing for all.

Sometimes when you hear about dynamics like that going on in scripture, it may hopefully be interesting, but perhaps not always clear how it connects to our context today. Well in this case, I want us to be able to see together just how directly, literally, importantly

this connects to how we are challenged to live as people of faith in our world today. And that's because both of those threads that we hear in Scripture are very much present still in our world, our faith, our lives today. Again, it will be no surprise to you that I want to call us together to that sense of being blessed to be a blessing. But for us to do so in our world with any integrity, we have to acknowledge the ways in which faith is often instead used as a sense of superiority over others and of claiming God on our side. And while I can point that out in others, it is something to see in ourselves too. Certainly we must call out as wrong when we see Christianity or any faith define itself as having a corner on God's blessing and truth – faith used to divide and deride others. But I find in myself too, just how easy it is to think about myself that my faith makes me better or smarter or more enlightened than others – rather than simply living out my faith as a gift and blessing for all.

So how do we do it? – how do we make the cloth of our faith out of the threads of God's blessing for all rather than of God's blessing only for us? Well, I think we start again and again with baptism – that is the gift that Caroline and Lucy provide for us today. When we really pay attention, baptism is a radical, countercultural activity that we participate in. In a world of divisions – the divisions of religion and culture and politics, the divisions of violence and inequity and brokenness – we receive in this water the sign of a blessing not that we possess, but that marks us by God's grace to be a blessing in God's world; we receive this water as enough to bless all. In this sacrament the waters give us renewed reflections of who God is and who we are: that God chooses to love, and that to know God's love is to be chosen for a purpose.

That all sounds good and lovely – and it is – but it is good and lovely in the strong and fierce sense of it. Because we practice this sacrament in a world in which – in the language of Joshua – there are indeed many other gods: the gods of oppression and violence; the gods of excess and disregard for creation; the gods of prejudice and hate; the gods of despair and disillusionment. It's not easy out there, and these waters are a given to nourish courage and strength in such a world.

Joshua says to the people: are you sure you want to take this on? Making good choices is costly – it puts a claim on your life – and once you know God’s grace, you cannot pretend to not know the call of God. ‘Yes, we will serve the Lord’ – because in these children, in these waters, we are renewed in the miracle of knowing God chose to give life to you, and God chose to give a purpose for that life – to be a blessing.

“Make good choices!” – Lucy & Caroline – people of God; God’s grace will show us the way, and we will help each other. That is the covenant we renew today: chosen by God to choose the ways of life for all God’s children. Thanks be to God. AMEN.