Joshua 24, selected verses
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Chosen and Choosing

This morning we jump from the foot of Mt. Sinai and the giving of the law to the Promised Land of Canaan. As Casey reminded us last week, in the Ten Commandments God makes a covenant with the people and gives them signposts, guidance on how to live as the people of God not simply by telling them what *not* to do but also in directing them in how to be. In this morning's text from Joshua, we come upon the people approximately 25 to 30 years after they have arrived in the Promised Land. As you may know, this book contains a brutal account of the Israelites' arrival in that land, detailing how God cleared out the other people who already lived there in order for the Israelites to make a home there. Scholar Robert Alter argues that the wholesale destruction of the Canaanite peoples is not exactly historically accurate. A more historically accurate account would likely contain a mix of the Israelites moving into towns and regions no longer occupied by others as well as a significant amount of intermingling and intermarrying. Once again, this book is not written in real time by a sideline reporter but generations later during the Exile when the people's identity, history, and devotion to God were up for grabs. The writers of Joshua shape the telling of the people's long history with God by pointing to the people's unfaithfulness to God and to the covenant as a way of explaining why God's beloved ones were decimated along with Jerusalem. The book of Joshua also seeks to reassure the exiled community and to remind the people of God's

faithfulness in the past as a way of offering hope for the community's future beyond Babylon, a future that looks precarious at the moment.

So why include tall tales of extreme violence, especially when that violence is attributed to God on the people's behalf? I'm not entirely sure. Maybe the author hopes to comfort a community who has been beaten down on all sides that God is still on their side and that it is worth their while to stick with the God who has stuck with them. I don't like the ugliness or the violence. I deeply prefer the kindness of Winnie the Pooh or the beauty of *Sense & Sensibility*. At the same time, I am convinced that the text has something to teach me, to teach us about the real challenges of living the life of faith in a baffling and embattled world. [Read Joshua 24: 1-5, 13-17, 18b-24]

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. With these famous words, Joshua stakes a claim in a tumultuous time. In more recent years, these same words have found their way onto tea towels and coffee mugs. A search on Etsy reveals page upon page of posters, printables, and doormats with this passage printed in big, bold, curvy script staking a claim for an unapologetic, even defiant faith in the midst of a whirling world. Ok. But the life of faith calls for something beyond pretty posters or dainty dishtowels, doesn't it? Joshua's words press me to consider what shape the life of faith takes beyond that doormat and behind those dishtowels. What does serving the Lord look like on the days when my family room looks less like a Pinterest photo and more like a disaster zone, when the bills pile up alongside the medications and the doctors' appointments, when campaign flyers overflowing with vitriol

flood my mailbox, when the ties that bind unravel, or when my real life no longer matches the photo on last year's Christmas card?

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. In those moments these words become less of a public declaration and more of an aspiration or a prayer. I hear them as a call to return to the God who has carried me—and yes, my family and my community—to this point. And in the context of Joshua's speech, this claim is not a once and done decision, but a daily turning and re-turning. "Choose this day," Joshua urges them—urges me—because while God's faithfulness is a constant, mine decidedly is not. I need these words less on the mat outside my front door to greet visitors and more on my bathroom mirror, as a screensaver on my computer, on my steering wheel, and on a loop playing through my air pods, because every moment of every day I am confronted with a choice between who and what I will serve, who and what I will worship and follow and give my heart to, as is every person I know and love. And pretty words on a tea towel are not enough to help me make the faithful choice or help me see who it is that saves me, who has been with me all along, and who will in fact stick with me when the road takes a turn I never wanted or even imagined. And all the post-it notes in the world are not enough either. I need to be surrounded by a community that shows me and helps me remember what that kind of faithfulness looks like, a community where I can be honest about the ways I fall short and the ways I struggle, a community who celebrates with me and grieves with me, a community who calls me back to love of God and neighbor, a community who names and helps me name the ways God has stood with me and with us through it all. I think Joshua needs that and knows in his core that the people need that, too.

Because his words are shared not in a private moment, but with the entire gathered community. With them, he rehearses the ways God has been at work saving them and their ancestors for generations, not because they or their ancestors always got it right, but because no matter what, God was and is faithful.

We are in the midst of this community's 100th year of worshiping in this bright and beautiful space, a milestone we will officially and enthusiastically celebrate next spring. That milestone means that this community has spent the last century worshiping the one God in the midst of the Great Depression, the Second World War, the battle for Civil Rights, assassinations, moon landings, Vietnam, the rise of computers, the birth of NASCAR, integration, the climate crisis, and 9/11. In this space for almost a century, Christmas pageants, baptisms, funerals, communion, confirmations, community prayer services, Good Fridays and Easters have persisted, along with glorious music, First Kids graduations, Girl Scout and Boy Scout celebrations, weddings, noisy offerings, ordinations and installations, too. Led by women and men who have been steeped in worship, this community of faith has done our faithful best to listen for God's Word and follow God's leading through lean times and glory days. Grounded in and inspired by the God we worship here, this community responded with help and resources when the last mill shutdown without warning, built bridges of all kinds with our siblings in Haiti, and found a way to bring comfort and hope by offering worship and fellowship in the thick of a rocky pastoral transition and in the face of a global pandemic. Time and again this community has chosen to serve the one God with its words and its witness. Time and

again this community has chosen to let go of other gods who promise easy answers, to turn aside from other forces that claim that they alone can save us.

In his address to the gathered people, Joshua makes it clear that sticking with God is not the people's default drive. If we are honest, it's not ours either. On the daily we are tempted to look out for ourselves, to denigrate others, to cling to anything and everything that promises an easier life for our families and ourselves. When the people insist that they can and will worship God alone, Joshua tells them, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."[1] In other words, Joshua knows full well that the people have been clutching other gods while pledging to worship God alone. He knows they have been tempted to cover all the bases, to have backup gods on hand to turn to in a pinch. It's tempting to scoff at our ancestors. I don't carry idols tucked in my pocket after all…or do I? Day in and day out, where do I turn for comfort? Who or what do I listen to for guidance? Who or what do I lean on for courage? Who or what do I trust to save me? The lure of the pocket gods is strong, but the great good news is that God of Israel is stronger. And on my better days, my more faithful days, I know this to be true. And on the days when I am tempted to listen to the ones who promise me easy fixes and easier answers, it is the church, this community of faith who reminds me it is the God of Israel, the God who has come to me in Jesus Christ who is at work claiming and saving me even now.

Toward the end of worship this morning, we will be invited to come forward and place a pledge card in the basket on the steps. It is one way—not the only way—but one way for me to

[1] Joshua 24:23, NRSVue

promise that I intend to offer myself and my gifts to the work of God's kingdom in and through this congregation for another year. That's an important thing for me to do, but the more powerful piece for me is seeing others do the same, because it shows me that I am not alone. In that simple gesture, I can see with my own eyes that I am surrounded by others who are also determined to respond to the grace of the God by showing up for and in this place as we seek to do our faithful best to listen for God's voice and to follow where Christ leads together. That moment serves as a tangible and visible reminder that this family of faith, this household is once again renewing the covenant with God, the same covenant God made with our ancestors all those years ago. In that moment we will declare to the world and to one another that we are choosing the God who has carried us through 222 years and 5 different church homes, choosing the God who has met us here every Sunday for more than 99 years, choosing the God who has been calling us out beyond ourselves for generations, choosing the God who promises to lead us into the next century and beyond, choosing the God who keeps choosing us, bumbling and baffling as we may be.

When those pocket gods grow louder and more insistent, when the temptation to stray grows stronger, I will need constant reminders of who and whose I am. And by the grace of God, this place and these people will be here to remind me, because this day and every day, we are emboldened to say to the world and to one another, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.