



Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 2024
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69
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Choices. We are making them all the time, all day, every day. Do I choose to go straight home, or go shopping and have dinner be just a bit late? Do I choose to

respond to that email with the veiled subtext, or just let it sit there in my inbox? Do I choose to send that letter to my manager about what I really think about the workplace, or do I tear it up and let it go? Do I choose to make war, or to keep peace? Do I choose to live in hope, open to God's future, or to live in fear, afraid of what may come?

Small choices, momentous choices. How do we choose, each day, the God, or gods, whom we will serve?

In our first reading, by now Joshua is an old man. He has finished the job Moses began, bringing the people up into Canaan after their 40-year exodus, and after many campaigns finally delivering to them the promised land.

Today in Joshua 24 we find ourselves at Shechem in the midst of a covenant renewal ceremony. Joshua is demanding that the people commit to serve the God who has called to them all along the way. This involves rejecting their familiar false gods. At the altar built by Abraham, Joshua commands: Choose this day whom you will serve!

To appreciate the high drama that follows, we must venture beyond where our assigned reading ends, because that reveals the affirmation we heard to have been half-hearted: "Oh yes, sure, we know who our God is, the one who has rescued us and led us this far." Joshua recognizes this is merely appeasement, not confession. Listen to the exchange between Joshua and the people that follows in Chapter 24:

Joshua saw that, at first, that they were not sincere -- just as Jesus in today's Gospel knew that many of those who had been following him were not sincere in their discipleship because, when they couldn't make sense of what he was saying, they quickly abandoned Jesus to other gods.

But belief in Jesus is not a rational decision. If someone demands evidence of why you believe, you will never be able to provide it to their satisfaction. Belief is simply embracing the truth that Jesus is who he says he is and who scripture says he is: The Son of God. Emmanuel, God with us. The image of the invisible God. The one by whom we may know God face to face. The crucified God who rescues us from death and frees us to live by taking our endless list of sins upon himself. The one who died for us and was incomprehensibly resurrected in a body with entirely new properties to affirm that if he lives, we also live.

To believe is to trust in these truths, to give ourselves completely over to them. Yes, doubt is a healthy part of faith. We must always be asking questions. But we do not doubt the truth that Jesus is who he says he is. Belief is no more complicated than that.

Imagine Jesus' heartbreak at this moment in John 6. Earlier in this chapter he satisfied the people's physical hunger. Then he told them that, unlike the manna in Exodus, he was the true bread from heaven for the life of the world. Now he sums up the entire discourse about how believers find life in him: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me." The familiar elements of bread and wine, offered not as symbols but as a reality beyond comprehension.

And what was the response we heard about from most everyone who had been following him around, hanging on every word – he whose purpose was to proclaim God's kingdom and shepherd them from death into life? Betrayal – which is why Judas is mentioned – betrayal not being handing Jesus over to the authorities, but rather not believing in who Jesus is, standing right there before him.

So they complain. They find fault. They beg to differ. They quibble and take issue and fail to trust that Jesus' only concern is for them and their well-being, and their eternal life through the simple act of believing, and that they find their rest and peace and hope in God through him.

Heartbreak? Yes, Jesus was human. Throughout his life on earth he rejoiced, he wept, he felt deeply, he had a sense of humor. True, that day in John 6 Jesus knew of all that would happen. But that did not keep him from feeling heartbroken. The scripture says poignantly that "many turned back and no longer went about with him."

We can imagine it didn't end there. As people abandoned him, they surely did not go quietly, but openly disparaged him, tempting others to jump on the bandwagon of finger-pointing. "Yeah, right. He says he is the Messiah? Absurd. Incomprehensible. We had no idea what he was talking about. Who does he think he is, feeding us this difficult teaching? Just give us more of those loaves from the basket!"

Why were people so quick to question and contend? Why couldn't they simply receive the one who truly cared for them and was trying to open to them the riches of eternal life, now and forever?

Because the people were still loyal to false gods. The gods of self-interest, self-righteousness, and self-absorption. These individuals wanted to be the center of attention, not Jesus.

As Jesus hung on the cross three years later, I wonder whether he reflected on this moment as one of the most difficult in a ministry rife with rejection. Because here he was being denied not by the chronically abusive Pharisees, Sadducees and Roman rulers who were threatened by him, but by his own followers. Was he thinking on this when he prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"? Or perhaps, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed"?

Why do we continue resist him? Given that taking his body and blood into ours is the easiest thing on earth -- a morsel of bread, a sip of wine -- why do we have such a hard time opening our hearts to him, when all we are called to do is receive him as the living God?

Why are we so quick instead to place our hope in the false gods of self-interest, self-righteousness, and self-absorption? In the gods whose purpose is to make war rather than keep peace? Why do we give ourselves over to false gods who we elevate on pedestals and who then

tempt us to do their bidding as we find ourselves lording it over others who we judge to be inadequate, or inferior, or incompetent?

Joshua knew that the people's first response to his command was insincere, so he challenged them until they were able to commit to serving the one true God. Joshua was then able to write the covenant that guided the people into the relationship for which God had prepared them all along, a covenant witnessed by this stone which still stands at Shechem.

This tells us that the real question is not whom we choose to serve, but whether we accept that God has already chosen us and given us the Son so that we can enter into that relationship.

God searches us out, offering each of us a personal invitation of unconditional love to be in relationship – an invitation sealed by the cross. A relationship that is life-changing. Abiding in Christ, we are made new. How can we begin to fathom it? That the God who set the stars in their courses, who created this world and the life systems that sustain it, has a place in God's heart for each of us? And not a room after our death in God's mansions, but a place right now that God is yearning for us to fill?

Our challenge then becomes not whom we serve but whether we receive with open arms the one whose greatest desire is for us to fill this special place. Can we hear the God of Holy Scripture and sacred experience crying out to us across the ages through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, to return to him with all our heart?

Peter did. His ecstatic eruption certainly helped heal the pain in Jesus' heart as he cried out, "Lord, to whom can we go? YOU have the words of eternal life!"

Amen.