

St. Paul's Congregational Church
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13
November 12, 2017 Proper 27A
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Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Israelites have been on the move to the Promised Land for a very long time. They've followed Moses, sometimes in good times, often in bad times – they've been bound together by the covenant at Sinai but they've broken that covenant over and over again. But God has remained faithful – God is always with them. But in the midst of their hardships, the people would forget that.

But now Moses has died and Joshua is their new leader. He gathers the tribes to renew their covenant – he reminds them of their story – the story of God calling Abraham from beyond the river – the story that God has been with them ever since and the promise of God's continued presence.

He reminds them that covenant is not something they inherit passively, like a story. Covenant is a living thing – a story they continue to create by their actions, by their faithfulness or lack of faith. To be in covenant with God is a choice that the people of Israel need to consciously make. It's not just their words but their worship, their hearts, their lives that need to incline toward God.

And so it is for us too. We need to know our history, how God has been faithful to those who have gone before and how they were faithful to God. But we also need to know that our faith history has a call and pull on our lives today too.

In Matthew's parable the lesson isn't that faith means you will see God coming – in fact, I truly believe God comes to us in the guise of an unexpected person or at an unexpected time. But we need to be ready – to live as though God will drop in at any time.

Choose this day who you will serve. I love this passage – it's so rich, so simple, so direct. It's the bedrock of our faith, isn't it. God has chosen us. It's up to us to choose God: God's ways known or to be made known to us. And it's up to us to choose to carry out the mission of the church – both the being and the doing of the church – to foster love of God and love of neighbor. This is our lifelong task both as individuals and as a gathered community.

This certainly isn't always easy – Joshua knew that when he spoke to his people. He told them the truth about their covenant with God. He and his family had chosen to follow the Lord, he proclaimed. And the people roared enthusiastically – they would do the same. But Joshua didn't accept their initial response – he pushed them – he reminded them not once but three times of the cost of the covenant and the consequences of breaking it. Probably the Israelites were ready to stone him for being so demandingly honest. It's hard to preach the consequences for all of us, I know, but Joshua did it bravely and well.

A parish minister writes, "I assume Joshua's role when I invite people to affirm their covenant with God and with each other. But I seldom have his courage in his

follow-though. If I did when parents bring their child for baptism, I would ask more than the usual question – do you promise to grow with this child in the Christian faith and offer him or her the nurture of the Christian church?”

She continues, “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 beautiful baby grows into a rebellious teenager who thinks church is dumb? I’ve never been that honest about baptismal vows but I bet Joshua would have been.”

We the congregation make vows at baptism too – so let’s think about these words at our next baptism – let’s think about what we agree to when those questions get asked of us. And let’s hold each other accountable as Joshua does. Choose this day who you will serve.

God chooses us. Do we choose God?

Each day we have the sacred opportunity to make a choice, to make a covenant with God, to be ready. Some days we’re more ready than others. Being ready I think is being available so God can use us in ways we’ve never dreamed of, or move us to places we’ve never been. It’s being open and ready to hear God, being willing to follow God’s lead. Being ready to get in touch with the presence, the works of God – to take a moment for gratitude, that presence is always with us for sure – but we’re not always ready to turn to it.

I know that’s true for me – when I’m busy or preoccupied or anxious – I’m afraid I’m not very available to God for God’s agenda either – I’m no different. But God has a way of bursting in or creeping into my agenda, my singlemindedness in awesome ways, slowing me down, and forcing me to see old things in new ways. I’m remembering two profound times when that happened.

Early one morning when I was in Connecticut a friend and I took off from Oxford Airport in a small plane – we were going to New Hampshire for breakfast to celebrate my birthday. When we left it was cloudy but as we went further east and north the sun came out and it was beautiful – there was still some color in the leaves, the air was clear – we could see for miles. There was even snow cover in some places and off in the distance we could see that it was indeed snowing. It was quite a sight. After breakfast we wandered around the Nashua Mall for a while – and when we came outside we were surprised to find it was raining, windy, raw – nasty. The weather had unexpectedly and quickly deteriorated to a point where it wasn’t clear whether we would be able to fly home safely. Finally, after checking with the weather bureau, my friend decided we could indeed leave – so we took off.

It was quite calm actually – we flew in and out of clouds – there were times when it rained, times when we could see the rolling hills below us, times when we couldn’t. Times when we were encased in the clouds – and then suddenly we were between cloud layers. Below us were puffy, silvery clouds and above us the clouds were thinner, there was the tiniest hint of pink, of purple, from the sunset. It was breathtaking. It was as if we were the only people in the universe – it was as if we were at the dawn of creation – and God said, indeed, it was good. There was nothing to do but look at and be part of this beauty, and to savor it. And to thank God for the gift of the moment.

Then suddenly, the clouds were gone and we were looking at the solid lines of car headlights on route 84 – that was pretty too in its own way – especially so since we weren't stuck in the traffic.

We landed, very grateful we'd gotten back safely, but also in awe of what we'd seen. God has a way of breaking into our lives – are we open to it?

So quickly we get back to normal, though – I had work to do, phone calls to make, a sermon to write – the peace, the grounding, the connection I'd found on our trip didn't last nearly long enough. God is persistent though.....

Later that same week there was a morning when I just couldn't seem to get it together – you know what that's like, right? I was rushing around and on one of my trips into the kitchen, I happened to look out the window and saw the biggest buck deer I've ever seen – he was just on the other side of the tree in my yard – that close. I stood absolutely still as he looked around; a car stopped and the people just stared at him. He looked at the car, then toward the kitchen window, took a couple of steps, stopped and looked again. Then he lifted his head high and leaped, bounded across the yard into the woods behind my house. He was magnificent. And it all happened so quickly, I could have missed it. What a gift that was. And what a time of gratitude and wonder for the beauty of one of God's creatures.

Choose this day who you will serve. Choose this day to be open to the presence of God – it will be there where and when you least expect it. I promise you that. Look for it – you'll find it. God hasn't moved. We have.

Joshua's choose this day isn't just a one time thing – it's a continuous daily decision. Maybe there are some folks who experience an event which from that moment on changes their lives – but for most of us, it's not like that, is it. We are constantly being called to make choices – our idols are all around us – calling us so loudly all the time. We know what they are – addictions of all kinds, power, work, the love of money, the love of things – you can add to the list. How quickly a gift from God can become an idol – when we forget the source of that gift.

And the final word from Joshua – choose this day who you will serve. Serve. Respond. Joshua called on his people to serve – and so are we. Serving comes out of the choices we make this day and every day. Serving comes out of someplace deep within ourselves, that still small voice, if you will, where we are in relationship with God, where God has touched us somehow and continues to touch us, through worship, through other people, the beauty of clouds or a deer. Somehow, somewhere, we have been made aware of God's presence, God's calling, and it's through that gratitude, that sense of thanksgiving that we serve. And there's the challenge to all of us: we have something to offer this world where people yearn for meaning, where people are so very anxious, to make sense of what's going on in the news, in our neighborhoods, in our lives. And we have answers through the grace of God.

We know that there is something bigger than us – we're not in control here. We have the good news of Jesus Christ – we have God's promises. And we have God's love – always, no matter what. We're called to share that with each other. Are we brave enough to do it?

Joshua tells us that the stakes are high – that we are accountable for our choices. He's tough, isn't he. But he's also right.

Today we're all here because God has called us here – we've all said yes on some level – that we've chosen this day to serve God. There are certainly a million other places we could be – but we've chosen to be here in worship. We come here seeking a center for our lives – we come here looking for meaning – we come here to praise God, to humble ourselves before God in confession, to hear God's word through music, the spoken word, the timeless words of the Bible, perhaps through the touch or smile of a friend – we come here to be strengthened and nourished and healed. We're all here with some kind of "hole in our soul" that needs to be filled – all of us.

We've made a choice – now what will we do with that choice? How will we serve? As individuals? As a community? It's so easy to leave here and re-enter our daily lives, isn't it – as if Sunday morning worship is just another thing to do on our schedules. But it's more than that, isn't it. What will you take with you this day? What difference does coming to worship make in your life? What difference does this choice make in your life? How does this choice you've made today carry over in the way you go to work, care for your children, treat your neighbors? What would Joshua say to us when we insist we have chosen to serve God? Is there enough evidence that he would believe us?

Let's be ready. Let's be available to God can use us in ways we've never dreamed possible. Let's be open and ready to hear God. Let's be willing to follow God's leading. Let's choose this day and every day to serve the Lord.

Amen!