

Rev. Lisa Schrott

August 25, 2024

Ephesians 6:10-20; Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Clothed in the Joy of Service

Our scripture this morning comes from the end of the book of Joshua – from his final speech to the Hebrew community after they defeated the armies of the people of Canaan. While it is a victory speech, to me it feels a bit more like a graduation speech, for Joshua offers a challenge to the people about whom and how they will serve. Hear now these words from Joshua 24:

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ...

“Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, **choose this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. The Lord protected us along all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed, and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for the Lord is our God.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

When asked about their favorite story from the Old Testament, almost 80% of U.S. Protestant churchgoers will share a story from one of the first few books of scripture, leaning heavily on Genesis and Exodus, according to a LifeWay Research study published last week. The most popular character stories among churchgoers are those of Moses, Noah, and David and Goliath. Others mentioned by at least 1% of people are Adam and Eve, Job, Ruth, Joseph, Jonah, Daniel, Esther, Cain and Abel, Abraham, Elijah, and Samson.¹ Missing from the list ... Joshua. So in the interest of changing the data up for next year’s survey, I’d like to share a bit of Joshua’s story as a way framing our message this morning.

¹ Aaron Earls. Churchgoers May Be Overconfident in Old Testament Knowledge. Online at: <https://research.lifeway.com/2024/08/13/churchgoers-may-be-overconfident-in-old-testament-knowledge/>

So who exactly is Joshua? Joshua was born into slavery in Egypt and as a youth witnessed firsthand God's action of liberation – as God intervened through Moses, inflicting plague after plague on Pharaoh and then leading the Hebrew people out of Egypt, parting the Red Sea, escaping the army of the Egyptians, with Moses leading the people into the Sinai peninsula.

It was Joshua who was chosen by Moses to accompany him to the top of Mt. Sinai where Moses received the law – the Ten Commandments. During the 40 years of wandering in the desert, Joshua was one of the twelve spies sent to scope out the land of Canaan. While ten of the spies expressed their doubts about conquering the land (as did the rest of the community), it was only Joshua and Caleb who expressed their confidence in the Lord to lead them.

Because of their assurance of God's faithfulness, Joshua and Caleb would be the only two of their entire generation who would enter Canaan. After the death of Moses, it was Joshua who led the people across the Jordan River, trusting in the promises of God to be fulfilled. He led the Hebrew people through many battles, eventually securing much of the land of Canaan. While he may be best known for his military prowess, Joshua was also a statesman and a spiritual leader. He was steadfast in his commitment to honoring the Lord with rituals that reminded the people of the covenants God made with them and encouraging them to remain faithful to Lord who led their ancestors out of slavery.

Joshua knew that entering this new life and this new land was not easy. The inhabitants of the land of Canaan worshiped many gods and had created idols and statues, which they believed had powers. In their minds, these small "g" gods ruled natural things such as the weather, harvests and fertility. The Canaanite people gave their loyalty to these visible "gods." It would have been far too easy for the Hebrew people to give their loyalty to these "gods," while interacting with the local people - gods that they could see and touch. Gods like money and social media, gods like popularity and image, gods like sports figures, politicians, Tik-Tok celebrities, and social media influencers. Joshua understood that these alternate small "g" gods fill our lives with false promises of happiness and a good life if we just achieve more, spend more, look a certain way, adopt a certain lifestyle, put ourselves and our needs before others.

So Joshua said to the people, "Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the Lord." Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Coffee cups, bookmarks, wall art, T-shirts, pillows, water bottles, quilts, tote bags, yard signs, plates, and a clock. What do these items have in common? They all can be purchased

printed or engraved with the charge Joshua gave to the gathered Hebrew community: "choose this day whom you will serve." As scriptures go, it is a pithy charge – easily remembered, not forceful - giving us autonomy in our decision making. And it could really come from almost any place in scripture – from the ancestors of our faith, to Moses and the prophets, to Jesus, to the disciples, to Paul’s missionary letters, this question has been asked in various times and in various ways throughout scripture. And yet Joshua’s version of the question is unique because of his context.

You see, our passage this morning wasn’t the first time Joshua had challenged the Hebrew community to decide whom they would serve, reminding them of all that the Lord their God had done for them, reminding them of the law – the commandments handed down by God to Moses and carried in the ark of the covenant. When Joshua led the Hebrew people into Canaan, the Jordan River waters dried up, allowing the priests carrying the ark of the covenant to stand in the middle of the river bed while the people crossed. After all had crossed, the Lord instructed Joshua to have an elder of each family to take a stone out of the dried up Jordan. The stones were to be a memorial to their children – a reminder that the Lord their God dried up the waters of the Jordan, like the Lord did to the Red Sea, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that they may love the Lord their God forever. Joshua was steadfast in his commitment to honoring the Lord with rituals that reminded the people of the covenants God made with them and encouraging them to remain faithful to Lord. The stones were tangible reminders of the work of the Lord, a Lord that they may not be able to physically see or have visible idols and statues like the Canaanite people had. Sometimes we do need tangible reminders because our memories are short.

The Hebrew people had been through battle after battle in a land where the powerful used the poor as pawns in their chess matches of territoriality. We tend to think of books like Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as books recounting the “history” of the people, written contemporaneously with the events described. However, these books were actually compiled by editors around the time of the exile. As Old Testament scholar Bill Brown notes, they were “written in the wake of national disruption and trauma brought about particularly from the Babylonian invasion and destruction of Jerusalem (597–539 BCE). ... In response to such national trauma, an “almost frenzied literary production” took place, and in a host of genres. Such production continued unabated beyond the exilic period, but often with a backward glance.”² Dr. Tim Meadowcroft, a New Zealand Old Testament scholar uses a proverb from the Maori, the indigenous peoples of New Zealand, to describe this phenomenon. *Ka mua, ka muri* roughly translates to “walking backwards into the future.”³

² William P. Brown. So much for dialogue. *Ministry Matters*, August 2nd, 2022. Online at: <https://www.ministrymatters.com/teach/entry/11406/so-much-for-dialogue>

³ Tim Meadowcroft. Proper 16. Joshua 24:12-a, 14-18. Connecting the Reading with Scripture. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2021. p249

Fast forward a couple of thousand years to the community gathered in Ephesus. As I shared two weeks ago, this letter has been attributed to the apostle Paul, although scholars suggest it was likely written by someone who had worked with Paul, rather than Paul himself. The letter is addressed to the “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” The community in Ephesus was trying to be faithful to the teachings of Christ, while living in the midst of the Roman Empire, surrounded by a pantheon of gods competing for their devotion. Just like the Hebrew community to whom Joshua spoke, the author of letter is challenging the people of Ephesus to remember whom they serve and reminding them that serving as ambassador of Christ is no easy task – as you heard Nadine read, it requires us to wear “the whole armor of God.” The author wants to make tangible, what can be so abstract. Who will you serve? The Roman rulers and authorities, the cosmic powers of darkness, the forces of evil? Or will you serve the God who ask you to love your neighbor as yourself? If you choose to serve the God of love, you need dress the part. The Rev. Thom Shuman, offers a paraphrase of the Ephesians passage that I think expresses beautifully our call to be clothed in service. He says,

And don't forget to dress the part as God's child, so you can face down the bullies, resist wickedness, do all you can to shut down the cruel. Put the suspenders on your work pants to go help rehab a community which was flooded. Don the yellow safety jacket to be a crossing guard for school kids. Slip into those sneakers to walk to raise money for kids with disabilities. Pin the rainbow flag to your shirt in solidarity with those the world would shame. Don't forget the broad brimmed hat to shade you as you pick vegetables and fruit for the free farmers market, and slip some chalk in your pocket so you can draw pictures on the sidewalks which speak louder than words about forgiveness.⁴

Joshua and the writer of the letter to the Ephesians were asking of their respective people that they be intentional about choosing to be in community. The Hebrew people and the Ephesians were both in places where their choices mattered, where their attitudes, intentions, and their heart mattered. They could choose to clothe themselves with the “armor of God” who asks them to serve God by loving their neighbor, welcoming the foreigner, and caring for the outsider rather seek the accolades of the powerful empire. They could choose to serve the Lord by remembering that their long trek from slavery to freedom was done not in isolation, rather as a community of people relying on the Lord God and relying on each other; mourning together and celebrating together. That through all of the hard things in life – they chose to serve the Lord by choosing to serve each other. Not begrudgingly, not out of a sense of obligation. Not because of fears. Rather to serve with love. Serve with joy. Serve with hope. Yes, there are forces of evil in the world – cosmic powers of darkness, as the writers of Ephesians says. Yes, there are powers and principalities that are seeking your loyalty. And yes, you have a choice in whom you will serve and how you will serve. Join me in prayer.

⁴ Used by permission of the author. (c) 2024 Thom M. Shuman, <https://www.facebook.com/thom.shuman>