

Choose this day
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-24

When I do a new volunteer orientation with a prospective volunteer, one of the things I am required to cover with them is Residents Rights. As an employee or a volunteer in a long-term care, or continuing care, or life plan community (keeping up with terminology can be tricky) we are required to be aware of and to support the rights of the residents who reside in our facilities. The list of resident rights is rather lengthy, so I do what I call the “Reader’s Digest” version with a new volunteer. Basically, our residents are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect and they can maintain their autonomy. This means they can make choices in how they live their lives, while a resident in our facilities.

Sounds good until you think about people needing to be wheeled in a wheelchair. The safest method for wheeling a resident is to make sure their feet are firmly planted on a pair of footrests attached to the wheelchair before you take them anywhere. We were put to the test a number of years ago by a resident who wished to attend a variety of activities off the unit where they resided, while also vehemently refusing to use footrests on their wheelchair. I use this as an example when training new volunteers. The resident was well within their rights to refuse to use footrests, but it would be dangerous for both the resident and the volunteer to proceed without those footrests. This is where we get to discuss the consequences of the choices we make. For that resident, it meant they could not attend the activities they wished to attend

until they would agree to use footrests on their wheelchair. In the end, it was actually a compromise, the resident was required to use one footrest and to cross their feet while in transit!

Learning about the consequences of our choices can be a lifelong learning event. The toddler that touches a hot stove learns that is not a wise thing to do. The school-ager that doesn't do their homework might learn what detention is all about. The newly licensed teen driver stopped for speeding learns that fast isn't always fun. The young adult with a freshly minted credit card might learn the hard lesson that there needs to be money at the end of the month to pay the bill when it comes due. The soon-to-be retired person who learns that 40 years of smoking means they likely won't get to see their retirement. There are so many ways we continue to learn about the consequences of our choices as we age.

In our story today, the Israelites are given the opportunity to consider the consequences of their choices. Joshua has served as their leader since the death of Moses. He has led them into the Promised Land, winning numerous battles, so God's chosen people could settle in the land. Joshua is approaching the end of his days and wants to prepare the nation for life without him. Now they have one very significant choice they are called on to make. But before we get to that, do you know why they even need to make this choice?

As God's chosen people, we might assume that the Israelites worshipped the One True God and Him alone. Sadly, that is not how it was. As early as the patriarch Abraham, God's people worshipped lesser, local gods. In the story of Jacob and his wives leaving his uncle, Laban, we are told that Rachel took

the household idols from her father's house and hid them in her tent. These gods, created by men, served a particular purpose or geographic locality. We read about them in the Biblical record – Baal, Molech, Ashtoreth, and the like. While enslaved in Egypt, the people would have learned about, and worshipped, the various Egyptian gods and goddesses. Even in their desert wanderings they were exposed to other people groups and their gods. So, it's not surprising that Joshua feels compelled to challenge the nation to make a choice. Will they serve the lesser gods of their ancestors and the lands surrounding them, or will they serve the Lord God who brought them out of Egypt and through the desert to inherit the Promised Land?

Seems like a no-brainer, doesn't it? The gods made of clay and wood, who can't move or speak on their own, would seem like poor choices, given all the miracles that they had seen their God perform. Yet, there was Joshua asking the people to make a definite decision one way or the other. And did you hear how he asked? Here are a few translations of the text:

If serving the Lord is undesirable to you (NIV), or if you are unwilling to serve the Lord (RSV), or if you decide that it's a bad thing to worship God (MSG), then choose the god you would rather serve.

Then he continues, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." He left no uncertainty about *his* choice of what god he would serve. Now the people had a chance to respond to Joshua's challenge. Whether it was because he used his "bully pulpit" as the nation's leader or because the people were now truly convinced that the Lord God was worthy of their

allegiance, their response was a resounding “We will serve the Lord!”

AMEN

They then recount all the things they have seen and experienced at the hand of God. They recognize that it was God that delivered their ancestors from Egypt, it was God who fed the people and provided water in the desert, it was God who saw that their clothing and sandals did not wear out even through 40 years of wandering. They recognized that it was God who drove out the nations that had inhabited the land that they now got to call their own. They recognized that it would be foolish to pledge their allegiance to any other god.

But Joshua has been with these people long enough to challenge their quick response to his question. He replies to the gathered throng:

¹⁹ ... “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

²¹ But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

The Biblical record, of course, reminds us that the people struggled to keep their promise of fealty to the Lord. The Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles tell the stories of kings and priests who failed to follow God and the consequences paid by God’s people for their unfaithfulness.

Today, we, too, are tempted to follow lesser gods. We are bombarded almost daily with the challenge to choose – political parties, news outlets, different sides of the climate debate, various commercial entities, and on and on, each vying to have us choose one over the other, each promising to grant us our most fervent wishes – to be more attractive, smarter, wealthier, and so on. What will be the consequences of our choices? Our response is just as important today as it was for the Israelites as they settled in the Promised Land. And so, Joshua’s words reverberate through the centuries challenging us once again, as the people set apart by God, to choose this day who we will serve. My fervent prayer is that our response is as resounding today as it was when Joshua first spoke these words:

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord! AMEN

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