

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

"¹ 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. ² 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. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac,

"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. ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, ¹⁷ 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. He protected us along all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed, ¹⁸ 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 he is our God."

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" ²² Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." ²³ He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Do you remember the game show, "Let's Make a Deal"? I believe it may still be on television, although there has likely been changes made to the show. His text made me think of that show, particularly those times when contestants were given choices to hold on to "this," perhaps money or some other nice prize they already won or choosing "that", something else, an unknown something perhaps behind a curtain. The audience would shout their advice, "Keep it," or "Take the curtain!"

Eventually after the struggle to make a choice, the contestant would announce his or her decision and the prize behind the curtain was revealed. The contestant was left with the results of their choice, either a nice prize, or a gag prize. They could not change their mind about what they wanted once all of the prizes were revealed. Their choice was final.

Every day we make decisions that affect our spiritual health and relationship with Jesus. This morning, I want us to think about the spiritual battle that goes on when one is choosing what or who will be one's God, and how that decision influences our other decisions and the way we live daily. Everyone has a god but not everyone chooses the one true God, the Creator of the

Universe, Father of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We all make an intentional decision to have a relationship with the one true God, or else an intentional or subconscious decision to follow some other god

Today we heard in the scripture reading, that Joshua was urging the Israelites to decide who or what was their God. He begins by reminding them of God's follow-through during their years of wandering in the wilderness after their captivity in Egypt, and eventually taking them into the Promised Land. It was after that momentous occasion that the Israelites faith was strong and robust.

But that soon started to change. A spiritual unsettledness arose. The pagan gods of the Egyptians and Canaanites were being adopted by some. There were those holding faithfully fast to God. Yet others surrendered to contemporary thought-forms, doubts, and pagan practices. And then there were those in the middle, Israelites who had no idea what to think or believe.

Joshua's journey with God was shaped decades before this moment in his life that we heard read to us this morning. His experiences left him with confidence that God would keep his promise to the Israelites. "Joshua was a long-haul veteran of a vital faith."

In a gutsy way, he stood before the gathered leaders of Israel at Shechem and began to remind them of God's covenant with them and urging them to move beyond their spiritual restlessness and indecision, to a clear-cut decision for God.

The lesson is simple, and the choice may seem simple, but when it comes to serving God with sincerity and faithfulness, things can get a little messy. We are challenged to put away our idols – such as friends, family, self, president, nation, political party, materialism, whatever it is that so mesmerizes us, and we are encouraged to let God be God, our one and only God.

The following story is told about Frank Sinatra. His health was in tatters and his life mired in financial wrangles, but Frank Sinatra refused to stop giving concerts. "I've got to earn more money," he said.

His performances, sad to say, were becoming more and more uneven. Uncertain of his memory, he became dependent on teleprompters. When his daughter, Tina, saw her father at Desert Inn in Las Vegas, he struggled through the show and felt so sick at the end that he needed oxygen from a tank that he kept on hand. At another show he forgot the lyrics to "Second Time Around," a ballad he had sung a thousand times. His adoring audience finished it for him.

"I couldn't bear to see Dad struggle," Tina said. "I remembered all the times he had repeated the old boxing maxim 'You gotta get out before you hit the mat.' He wanted to retire at the top of his game, and I always thought he would know when his time came, but in pushing eighty he lost track of when to quit. After seeing one to many of these fiascoes, I told him, 'Pop, you can stop now; you don't have to stay on the road.'"

With a stricken expression he said, "No, I've got to earn more money. I have to make sure everyone is taken care of."

After Sinatra's death, there was a long unpleasant family wrangling over his fortune.

Do you need to ask yourself, what is so very important to you that you will do anything, even sacrificing yourself to acquire it? Is it really so important that you are willing to put it above God? Is it so important that you are willing to risk your own soul and our relationship with God? There are times we need to think on this and choose who will be our God, for God's sake and for our own sake. In moments like these, we should look over the facts and choose. Hopefully, if a wrong decision has been made, it will become evident before it is too late.

The choice about who or what will be your god is a personal one. But we all need to know that no one can sit on the fence when it comes to deciding what kind of a relationship we

will have with God. Choosing to sit on the fence is really just an attempt to have the best of both worlds. Those trying to figure out the direction of their faith may need to intellectually struggle with and weigh the various options they have for their faith, and that's okay. Asking faith questions is actually a good thing because it reveals that one is seeking meaning for their lives, and a God who will give it meaning. But people need to make a decision at some point because never making a decision **IS** actually making a decision, a decision that separates one from God.

Making a decision for God begins with welcoming His Son, Jesus, into our lives. Jesus' life and teachings point the way to God. Following his example and allowing his Spirit to live in and through us deepens and strengthens our relationship with God.

Jesus helps us to have the wisdom, courage and confidence needed to exert our influence on others rather than allowing ourselves to be pushed around by those who have taken a different path. It's easy to go along with the crowd, to have the things that "everyone" else has, to do what "everyone" else is doing. It's hard sometimes to stand up to temptation, but a faithful follower must do that.

The decision for Christ should not be made lightly. When I taught youth baptism classes, I tried to urge the youth to carefully make their own decision for Christ because a clear personal decision would lead to a meaningful genuine relationship with God. But being baptized just because everyone else in the class was doing it would likely lead to disappointment, because it would be someone else's faith, not their own, and therefore would not be sincere, seeking, and growing.

When choosing God, one must be willing to go public with one's faith. "Jesus had some words to say about those who had a private confidence in him but were unwilling to acknowledge him in public. He said, 'He that denies me before men, him will I deny before my Father which is in heaven.'"

And finally choosing God as our one and only God means we must be willing to follow through with our all. We must give our whole selves to Jesus. Our choice cannot be taken lightly. We must be willing to embrace that which makes us uncomfortable when being faithful and obedient.

Glenn "Tex" Evans was addressing a group of United Methodists in Maryland, trying to explain to them why the Wesleyan movement created such a powerful spiritual awakening in this country, even to the point where the 19th century is known as the "Methodist Age" in American history. He wasn't having much success until they showed him a river near the chapel that Francis Asbury once crossed. It was a river that Asbury crossed at flood tide in order to preach to the people in that chapel.

The Maryland Methodists asked Tex, "Do you want us to tell you how Asbury crossed that swollen, rushing river?"

Tex responded: "No, but I do want you to tell me why he crossed that river. In that "why" is the key to why the Wesleyan movement became such a powerful force for God and the gospel." Asbury made the decision to be obedient and committed to serving God and God's children.

Perhaps, some of you may be thinking to yourself right now, why am I hearing this again. You may have drifted into some other thoughts because the message is so familiar to you. Remember, the many heroes we read about in the bible, and the children of God, had moments of drifting, unconsciously sometimes into a journey distancing them from God, and they needed a wake-up call to bring them back to him. If we are honest with ourselves we know we are not any different. We are foolish to think we are perfect, that we always make the right choices. I don't

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say that to put anyone down, but instead, to help us realize how deeply loved we are, so much so that we are pursued and freed by God's grace and drawn back to Him.

The decision to worship and serve the God we read about in the Bible, or some other god of our choosing, is the most important decision a person can make. To be honest, we cannot sit on the fence when choosing because even that is a decision, it's a decision against walking with Jesus. We are faced with making this decision every day. May our daily living be shaped by our decision to follow the one and only true Living God. Amen.