

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 13 8-18-24 Text- Joshua 24: 1- 2a, 14-18

Choices. Life is full of them, isn't it? It starts even before we get out of bed in the morning. Are you going to get up just because that annoying alarm has gone off, or do you hit the snooze button and stay snuggled in your nice cozy bed just a little bit longer. And then once we are "up and at 'em" the choices we face just don't stop. What am I going to eat for breakfast? What clothes am I going to wear? What exactly *am* I going to do with the day? All these decisions to make and the day's just getting started!

You and I make lots of choices every day, all day long. Like coffee or orange juice? Pepsi or Coke? Casey's or Kwik Trip? Chevy or Ford? (Actually, that's an easy one, the correct answer is "Dodge"!) Should I eat one piece of cake for dessert or four? Go out for dinner or stay home? Start a new job, or stick with the current one? Take an easy class or a challenging one? Use a red crayon or a blue one? Some choices are huge; some are small. Some make a huge difference, and some aren't very important at all. Some are nerve-racking and others you hardly even notice.

Since there are so many choices to make in life, is that how it goes when it comes to God, too? Isn't that what's going on in our Old Testament reading, after all when it says, "Chose this day whom you will serve"? Let's take a closer look at Joshua 24 and see just what kind of choices we have when it comes to believing in and following God.

The scene is a remarkable one. The Israelites have just finished driving their enemies out of the Promised Land. The fighting is done and they're settling into their new homes when Joshua assembles the twelve tribes of Israel to give them one last talk as their leader. "Thus says the LORD," spoke Joshua, and the word of the Lord comes to the people. What does the LORD say? As recorded in this chapter, Joshua reminds the people of their ancestors who lived beyond the great Euphrates River, their forefathers who served *other* gods. He reminds them that He took one of those fathers, Abraham, out of that foreign land of foreign gods and gave him the land of Canaan. The LORD reminds them of Isaac and Esau and Jacob and the descendants of Jacob, and what He did for them. He reminds them of Moses and Aaron, God's chosen leaders that He used to bring His people out of slavery in Egypt. He reminds them that He drove the peoples out before them and He told them "I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant" (Jo 24:13).

Now Joshua delivers to the people of Israel this command: 'Serve the LORD; put away the gods!' Serve the LORD, the LORD who speaks these words, who rescued them, and who delivered them into a land He has promised. And if for some reason, some **odd** reason, this seems evil, displeasing in their sight, Joshua demands that they choose which god they will serve. How about the ones beyond the Euphrates River? How about the ones back in Egypt? Joshua, however, declares, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Jo 24:15).

This sure looks like one more decision, albeit a **big** decision, that we all have to make in life! Don't Joshua's words prove that our world of choices extends all the way to God? Choose the gods your fathers served, or serve the gods of the Amorites, or, speaking to us today, Joshua just might say 'serve the god that brings you pleasure, or serve the god of leisure time, or serve the god that tells you that you are always right, or choose a combination, or choose the one true God.' Is Joshua really suggesting to the tribes and to you that they and we have the power to choose God? **Not at all!** Anyone who believes that Joshua 24 is about making a choice for the LORD has sadly misunderstood this word. Choose for yourselves amongst the gods that your fathers worshiped, sure. Choose one of the gods of the Amorites, yeah you could do that. That is no different than choosing between Coke or Pepsi, Casey's or Kwik Trip. Make the LORD just another choice? **No way!**

The Israelites respond strongly and adamantly that they will not follow any other God than the LORD. They're appalled at the very thought of it: "Far be it from us!" 'Never! May it never be!' They say they will follow no one other than the LORD who saved them and showed them great signs (Jo 24:17).

Now do they say this simply because they didn't want to bite the hand that fed them? Is it just a matter that they made a good and educated choice? Joshua bursts that bubble right away. In the verse right after our text, he said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God" (v. 19). Joshua recognizes the sinful condition of this people and their lack of power and authority to do any choosing. Freedom of choice just failed them.

The confession that Joshua and the people make is a bold one: my household and I will serve the LORD, and far be it from us that we would serve anyone else, for the LORD is the one true God. This response, though, has nothing to do with their choice but everything to do with... **God's choice. God** took Abraham from beyond the river. He chose Abraham. **God** delivered His people from Egypt. **He** chose them. Now this word of the LORD has come to the twelve tribes. And their response? To serve and follow Him. Their **response**

flows from **faith**. And faith is never a choice people make, but always a **work_of God**. God has done His work on them through His word!

Faith is **always** a work of God! It's the same way in your life and my life. Just like neither Joshua nor the Israelites chose the LORD, so too, we have no grounds for making a choice to come to faith in Him. Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." (Jn 15:16). **But** what Joshua was saying is, 'Choose for yourself this day whom you will **follow**' (Jo 24:15).

The one whom you will follow is Jesus who has already **chosen** you and leads you to Himself by faith. The one you follow is Jesus who has drawn you to His cross through the waters of your Baptism. The one whom you follow is Jesus who finds you dead in your trespasses and brings you to Himself—to life—even when we had no intention to follow. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). God's choice for you is no accident or afterthought: As St. Paul says it so beautifully in Ephesians chapter one: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." (Eph 1:3-4).

So, what does the LORD's work mean for Joshua? What does it mean for the Israelites? What does it mean for you? It means being chosen by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who sent His Son to be your salvation, the promise fulfilled. It means receiving that gift by a faith that is His work alone. It means living a confession that looks like these words: As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD, the LORD, who is the true God. It means confessing with our lips and lives that we follow none other than the LORD. He is our Savior who came after us and rescued us on the cross.

And the best news of all is that God Himself will give you the strength you need to be follow Him faithfully. He will give you the motivation you need to serve Him. Every time you hear His Word you will again hear all He has done for you. God will also give you the power you need to serve Him, by putting Him above all things, as you live out your life under His blessing and care. Every time you hear His Word the Holy Spirit will help you drown the sinful nature that wants to do nothing that pleases God. Through the Word, the Holy Spirit will strengthen you to throw away all false gods and to serve the LORD. Through His Word. He will forgive you and lift you up when you fall. Through His Word He will strengthen you to keep following Him.

So, we can boldly say with Joshua and the people of Israel, “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” The choice to keep following Him won’t always be easy, but we have strength from the God who served us and gave His life for us. With that kind of help, we cannot fail. Amen.