

Sermon – “To Whom Can We Go?”

Sunday, August 23, 2015

Scripture Lessons – Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18, John 6:56-69

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Our first reading is from the book of Joshua, chapter 24, verses 1-2 and 14-18. After the liberation of the Exodus and the settling of the Promised Land, Israel is finally living in peace and freedom. At the end of Joshua’s life, he gathers all of Israel together and sets before them the choice to renew their covenant with God. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*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.*

*14 "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." Amen.*

Our second reading, from the Gospel of John, chapter 6, verses 56-69, picks up in the middle of Jesus’ discourse on the Bread of Life. His listeners are troubled by his words, and his disciples are divided. Yet despite it all, Simon Peter and the Twelve affirm what they have come to know about Christ. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

*56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. 60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." 66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

The title of the sermon: “To Whom Can We Go?”

*The text: “Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua 24:15*

Let us pray: Gracious God, although we once were strangers, you receive us as friends and draw us home to you. Feed us with the bread of life, and help us to always turn toward you. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord!

During my two weeks’ vacation on the West Coast, I saw so much of the beauty of God’s creation, but to paraphrase the words of the psalmist, my heart longed for this place and these people. It is good to be together in this place! And I know I am not the only one who has been away—summer is, after all, the season of coming and going. So it seems fitting, this last Sunday of summer, as we look ahead to Commotion Sunday and school and the beginnings of so many programs and activities, that our first reading begins with the gathering of the people before God.

Joshua, you might remember, is the successor to Moses. He is the one who led the people of Israel into the Promised Land. I am often troubled by Joshua and his book, for the story it tells is one of violence and war, for the Promised Land was not empty. But despite my own trouble with the book of Joshua, Joshua the man proves himself a capable and strong leader, and a faithful servant of God. He is guided by the Lord, and so guides the people of Israel to victory after victory, until the Promised Land is truly and entirely their own.

Today’s reading comes at the end of Joshua’s life, a long time after the last battle has been fought. Israel has known peace and prosperity for many years. So Joshua calls the people together, and they come and gather before God. And Joshua speaks as a prophet—“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.” And Joshua narrates their story in a speech we did not read today. He tells of God’s call to Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob, of Joseph and the move to Egypt, of Moses and Aaron and Miriam and the Exodus, of the time in the wilderness, and the arrival in the Promised Land, and of all the protections and victories that led to Israel’s peaceful and prosperous living.

And then Joshua puts the choice before them—the gods of their ancestors, or the Lord. And all the people choose God. This prophetic speech of Joshua’s is notable for its neutrality. It contains no threats, no anger, no roars of violence against foreign deities, no denunciations of idols or condemnations of the people. It contains no pointed mention of their own mistakes or grumblings against God—no mention of the disobedience that kept them in the wilderness for 40 years, no allusion to the worship of the golden calf. It is simply the recounting of God’s involvement in the lives of Israel—God’s part in the covenant made so long ago. And ends in the question, freely put to the people. They are living in peace and prosperity and have no need for a divine protector. God offers no rewards for choosing to put away other deities. God threatens no punishment for failing to do so. It is simply the choice, to be made of their own selves—whether or not they will serve the Lord. And in one voice, without any of the grumbling or complaining or divisions that have marked their history, they choose God. This is quite a contrast to the crowd in our passage from John.

Our reading today is the end of a lengthy conversation about bread, sparked by the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus has revealed himself to be the Bread of Life, the new manna from heaven. And the crowd has been struggling to wrap their minds around this, just as the Israelites in the

desert struggled to understand the gift of manna. So Jesus has been trying and trying and trying to help them understand this good news, explaining it every way he can think of. But the crowd has been grumbling, and complaining, and dividing.

Today's reading opens right at the moment when Jesus' PR person is having a seriously bad day. He has been speaking fairly obviously in imagery up until now, but here he's all in—he has committed to his metaphor—“those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will abide in me and I in them. Whoever eats me will live because of me.” The Last Supper hasn't happened yet. The disciples don't have any physical symbol to hang onto here. Even to our ears, people who regularly celebrate the holy mystery of the breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the cup, this sounds awfully like straight up cannibalism. So it's no surprise that now it's not just the crowd grumbling, but also his disciples. It isn't a surprise, maybe, that they call it a difficult teaching, and question it. And it probably doesn't help that Jesus' response is the fairly confrontational, “Does this offend you?” This is not Jesus at his most comforting. So many of his disciples leave him, and no longer go with him.

But when Jesus confronts the twelve, Simon Peter responds for them all—“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

“Choose this day whom you will serve.” Both our readings today hinge on this moment of choice. “Do you also wish to go away?”

These choices are remarkable to me. They are about a life of faith, but they are about the LIVING of faith. These are not challenges to choose doctrine, or to affirm a belief. There is nothing abstract or intellectual about these choices, nothing about choosing to believe. Instead, the people of Israel and the twelve disciples are asked to choose action—to serve the Lord, to continue to go with Jesus. And to choose these actions is to choose them every day. To serve the Lord is to choose to shape one's life so that one lives in active kindness, justice, mercy, and humility. To go with Jesus means to choose to keep walking a long journey that, for the disciples, included rejection, deprivation, homelessness, incarceration, and death.

Yet what is the alternative? To whom would they go? The Lord is their God, and has chosen them again and again. No matter how difficult the teaching might be, Jesus has the words of life, a sustenance and nourishment found nowhere else. And there is something else. For these two stories also hinge on community. Simon Peter speaks for all twelve, and they bind themselves together for this long walk. The people of Israel speak together, without division, and bind themselves together in service of God.

It is striking to me that in these stories of such profound and important moments of choice in the life of faith, the decisions are made in community. It is in the community, in the congregation, that such choices are made, for it is in the community that such choices are lived. It is the community, bound together in the life of faith, that supports and strengthens each member as each person works to shape their own living in service to God, as each person walks their own path with Christ. It is the community that cradles us, and points us back to the eternal words.

Like Simon Peter and the Twelve, we choose, in our own ways, from wherever we are, however old or young, to continue to go with Jesus, to abide with Christ, knowing there will hardship and challenge and the darkest of times, for we make this choice with the gathered community, here and in places throughout the world and throughout history. The road may be hard. There are teachings

that are difficult and not easy to accept, and maybe even offensive at times. But when the choice is before us to stop, to go away, we answer like Simon Peter—Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

So we choose, like Simon Peter, like Joshua and his household, to serve the Lord our God. We choose to trust that, in all the difficulty, we will be nourished and sustained by the Bread of Life. We choose the assurance that God chooses US, and has chosen us over and over again. And we make this choice together as the body of Christ, strengthening and supporting and feeding one another with the words of life in times of peace and prosperity and in times of deprivation and darkness, in all our coming and going and gathering.

For this choice is our story, and this choice is made to be lived.

It is good to be together in this place.

Thanks be to God.