

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 Pastor Bill Uetricht 8/16/09 12 Pentecost

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began his autobiography with these words: “Of course, I was religious. I grew up in the church. My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy’s brother is a preacher. So I didn’t have much choice.”

I am sure that Dr. King was well aware of the Book of Joshua and its perspective on the faith. In some ways, this book reflects King’s view of his own calling. Like King, Joshua has a great historical consciousness, this sense that who he and his people are is deeply tied to those who have come before him and what **they** experienced. In the section of Joshua that was left out of our first reading we have a long list of people out of the past whom God led, to whom God gave great gifts. “Long ago, your ancestors,” Joshua says, “lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. 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; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out.” Joshua goes on like this for many more verses, reciting God’s great actions throughout the whole history of Israel, speaking of the great figures in that history.

It is after this great recitation that he confronts Israel: “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. Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” It’s almost as if Joshua is echoing

King's statement. What else could we do? In light of being a part of a community that has had this covenantal relationship with God forever, what else could we do? Of course, we are religious. Of course, we will serve the Lord. In some ways, there is no other choice.

I get the sense that this is in part what Peter is saying in our gospel lesson for today, when Jesus is starting to feel the rejection of the crowds. Honestly, Jesus has egged them all on, as his statements about his identity become increasingly far-fetched and, some believe, heretical. He had previously said that he was the bread of life, the bread that had come down from heaven. That seemed a bit arrogant. Then he said that the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. That is odd. It sounds a bit like cannibalism. And now today he ups the ante even further: "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" In the gospel of John where he was before was with God. Wow! Increasingly, he is sounding like he is connecting himself to God. In fact, in today's reading he says, "I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." The Father and he are deeply connected. The crowds react to this kind of talk. They turn their backs on him. And so Jesus asks the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Peter responds, "Alleluia. Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia. Alleluia." I don't know if I have any other choice, Jesus. Where else can I go? Only you have the words that bring us life that matters, life that is always full and deeply connected to God. We will not turn our backs on you. We really have no other choice.

Choice is a big matter in our culture. You and I thrive on the ability to select the brand of toothpaste that we think meets our needs. I mean, we are people with sensitive teeth, and we really want those

sensitive teeth to shine. And what that toothpaste takes like is of great significance to us. Therefore, we are just so grateful to have so many choices for our toothpaste selection. We see much of life as a matter of choice: the cereal we will buy, the church we go to, the cable and internet service that we have. We Americans love choice. Because of that, many of us, as a friend of mine from seminary suggested, suffer from choice fatigue. We get worn out by all of our choices. It is an anxiety-producing event for me to go to Meijer's to pick out pop. Will it be diet, or will be high test? Caffeine-free or juiced up with additional caffeine? Low sodium, regular, or no sodium?

Many of us get overwhelmed by our choices, but we thrive on choice, nonetheless. It is probably why so-called choice theology has dominated the American religious scene. You know, the kind of theology that says that the faith is all about you choosing Jesus, taking him into your heart. The idea for the faith then becomes all about getting other people to choose Jesus, just as in our family we choose Crest toothpaste. We **get** Jesus, just as we **get** Crest toothpaste. There are all kinds of problems with choice theology, not the least of which is the sense that faith is one more consumer item to get or buy. And also, Jesus makes it quite clear in the Gospel of John that his disciples did not choose him, but he chose them. It is the Father, he says, who draws people to him. The faith, then, is a matter of being drawn and not so much a matter of choosing.

Often when it is all about our choosing we can become a bit triumphant. I chose Jesus. I got the goods. Too bad you don't. Dr. King, Joshua and Peter seem to have a much less triumphant view. Dr. King: I couldn't help but be religious and take the job of being a pastor. Joshua: In light of all that God has done and in light of being part of a

community that forever has been connected to God, what else can we do but serve the Lord. And then Peter: "Where else can we go? Only you take us to the place that matters." Faith understood in this way is much more real, more honest, discovered more in the real struggles of life. And it is also less, then, about me and my choices and more about the God who chooses us and about the community of faith out of which our faith comes.

Now having said this, though, we can't run from Joshua's clear command to Israel: "Choose this day whom you shall serve." Dr. King became a preacher because in many ways he couldn't help it. But let's face it. He gave in to the calling. He responded to the task. He sat down at seminary and listened to the lectures, read the books, and wrote the papers. He couldn't help but be a preacher, but he needed to choose to become one. There were many other options for him.

It is this options reality that most concerns Joshua. God's people are finding themselves in the midst of foreign lands, foreign people, foreign gods. There are the gods of the Amorites, the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Jebusites. All of these gods are options. All of them the people of God could serve. But Joshua says that as for him and his family they will serve the Lord. They will serve the God who rescued them out of the hands of the Egyptians, out of the house of slavery. They will respond to the One who chose them. They will serve not the false gods, who only take and take, but the one true God, the God who gave and gave to their ancestors and continues to give and give and give to them today. In other words, they will serve the God who has chosen them. They will serve the God of grace and love and freedom.

Things are no different for us. We have all kinds of options. We have all kinds of gods we can choose to serve. And some of those gods

are really appealing. I mean, what they promise us! We can make it big. We can be popular. We can always be comfortable. We can run the show. We can have it all. But how often these gods only take and take from us! How often they disappoint us! How often they take us down paths that are destructive!

Choose this day whom you shall serve! I don't know what else we could do. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. As for me and my house, we will serve the God of grace, freedom, and, love. Lord, to whom shall we go? Only you, the God of compassion, the God of grace, the God of freedom have the words that ring true, the words which bring us life that is full and life that really matters. To whom shall we go? So whom shall you serve?

The people of God in our first lesson were quite compelled by Joshua's sermon. And so they responded to Joshua's command with words that suggested that they could do no other than to choose to serve God. Join me in speaking that response, making it our own. The words of the response start in verse 16 of chapter 24, the part that begins with the words "far be it..."

"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 these great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the people 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 he is our God."