

October 16, 2022: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Joshua Renews the Covenant

Readings: Joshua 24:1-15; Matthew 4:8-10

© Rev. Janet Kettering, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Boulder, Colorado

Let us pray: *God of deliverance, you saved the people of Israel and chose Joshua to lead your people into the Promised Land. Choose us now, and equip us to live with faith in you for the sake of the world. We pray these things in the name of the One who served you – for us and all humanity, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Let us pause for a moment at the outset to let that command sink in.

Having picked up where Moses let off, Joshua nears the end of his life. He gathers the leaders of the tribes of Israel to Shechem, Canaan. This is the place of Abram's first encounter and covenantal relationship with Yahweh. It was in this place that the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Though the journey to this place of promise has been long and circuitous, they have finally arrived and find themselves assimilated among other groups, facing the temptation to worship foreign gods.

Summoning the people to obedience, Joshua calls on their collective memory to remind them of God's saving actions throughout their journey. Using the covenant agreements God has made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the exodus from Egypt; and the possession of the land on which they now stand to help them remember how God has saved them, Joshua calls on the people to pledge their faithfulness to God and God's law.

In one sense, our individual and collective lives can feel far removed from that of the Israelites. On the other hand, I wonder, as we hear this imperative to "choose this day whom we will serve", how very different we really are.

We each have a story of relationship – a narrative, as it were – as individuals and a faith family gathered – which speaks to the presence of God and brings us to this moment. The value of that story is found not in the history itself, but rather, in our answer to **this** moment in time.

This is more than a history. It is a narrative that continues to be written. The reality of a God of faithfulness who does not abandon us, who continues to love us, who, in spite of our unfaithfulness, offers us the opportunity to again choose whom we will serve. Amazing.

The question for us today is twofold. First, whom will we choose? And, second, what does choosing to serve the Lord

look like for both the individual and the collective "us"? To choose to serve God first and foremost is more than a momentary decision. It is one thing to commit to choosing God. It's another to fulfill that commitment.

I don't know about you, but for me, the struggle is not found in the choice I've made for my life. It is found in actually remembering that I made that choice in my moment-to-moment living ... because remembering and implementing the choice that draws us here today into our daily living ultimately affects everything we say and everything we do. And it ultimately affects the lives of everything and everyone around us.

Like Israel, we live in the vast expanse of God's imaginative creation. With that comes a vast array of many things to serve – things to which to devote our time and attention and resources. You know what those things are; they are individual to each of us.

I wonder if the most devious of them all, though, is the very thing Satan presented to Jesus when he took him to the high mountain. On its face, we can view what Satan tempted Jesus with as worldly possessions when, in fact, the "stuff" he offers is really a cover for another temptation, another god: The god of "self"; my ego, my own agenda.

More often than not, that seems to be the god that plays out in our daily choices. When my words and actions are driven by the weighing of whether a particular choice or decision makes me appear to others as either weak or strong, am I choosing to serve God ... or self?

That applies to our life together in this place, our lives within our families, our schools, our jobs; every relationship we have. In the midst of it all, our call is to look at how our decisions reflect whom – or what – it is that we're choosing to serve.

If you have – or are – serving in congregational leadership here at Shepherd, you are aware of the many ways we are called to make decisions which affect this church and our life together.

In that process, we are called to the awareness of how each of those decisions will ultimately reflect our collective choice to serve this God above all others – the God of love reflected in the life of Jesus. In turn, those choices will impact the view the community around us has of the very Gospel we serve. That applies to our individual lives, as well; and, truthfully, it is not simple, is it? It is so easy to confuse my wants with my needs and to set aside the notion that a choice I am

making today has any direct correlation to the choice I continue to make to serve God.

The Gospel passage for today reminds us of more than the temptation of Jesus. I cannot for the life of me understand why the words of Scripture cannot just make everything clear – but for the fact that we learn best when we engage in the questions and the struggles ourselves.

It seems that when Jesus surveyed all that Satan offered him – the world in all its vastness and splendor – it had unintended consequences. What was meant to tempt Jesus served instead as the antidote to the ego which could make him choose whom he would serve that day.

Looking at God's vast gift of creation, Jesus remembered how each of those things came into being. In remembering the act of Creation, Jesus was reminded of the Creator. He knew that he could never truly possess any of those things because none of them belonged to him alone. They belonged to God.

Is not that the antidote to the god of self for each of us, as individuals, and the collective us? To remember that whatever it is, whatever we have, it is only ours for a fleeting moment. We cannot possess it; we can only receive it and use it ... enjoy it ... savor it ... rejoice in it.

Deciding how to use those gifts, whether it is this building or anything we have as individuals, looks a lot different when I remember the One to whom they actually belong.

In this moment, on this day, we are invited again to choose whom we will serve. Thankfully, with that invitation comes the reminder that Jesus made and kept; the choice which ultimately means life for us. This is the ultimate gift; not to let us off the hook, but to encourage us to keep trying. We try not for our own sake, but for the sake of a world desperately in need of knowing the God of love and forgiveness we serve.

Amen