



You Did Not Choose Me

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-70a

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The 13th Sunday after Pentecost

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Choose this day whom you will serve... (Joshua 24:15)

Do you want to go away as well? (Jesus, John 6:67)

Our Scripture readings for today present us with two different sets of characters, in two different places, in two different millennia. Two different moments in time. The same question. The same dilemma.

In our Old Testament lesson, we meet Joshua, an Israelite born in slavery in Egypt who escaped to freedom during the Exodus, became an assistant to Moses, and following Moses' death the leader of the Israelites. Joshua led the tribes as they settled in the land of Canaan, occupying abandoned villages and building new settlements in the unpopulated central highlands. Joshua is an old man now. It is a time of relative peace. He summons all the tribes together with their elders and leaders, judges and officers to the centrally located city of Shechem, where there was an altar to the LORD (Joshua 8:30-35). Joshua's address to the people is a recitation of their history beginning in verse 2, noting that in olden days, their ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates (in the land we call Iraq) and worshipped other gods. It concludes with Joshua's charge "choose this day whom you will serve."

The choice, he says, is theirs, to serve the gods their ancestors grew up worshipping beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, or serve the LORD. It is a choice between the familiar traditions of the past or the still emerging possibilities of this new era, this new day.

The people respond, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD and serve other gods. For it was the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ... did great signs in our sight ... protected us along the way ... therefore we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:16-18). Their answer might be summed up as, "We choose the LORD because we know from first hand experience that the LORD has chosen us."

Jump ahead 1260 years or so, to the Galilean town of Capernaum. Jesus reveals to the people the mystery that at the heart of the giving of manna in the wilderness, the feeding of the 5000, and the Lord's Supper is a Holy Communion in which those who eat and drink are not only

physically nourished but abide in God and God abides in them. Jesus reveals this mystery in harsh, graphic terms, describing communion with God as a gnawing on his flesh and drinking his blood. The imagery is outrageous, revolting, even absurd. Jesus takes actions forbidden by Scripture, tradition and Israelite custom, and lifts them up as signs of a holy and spiritual communion between God and humans.

As a result many of Jesus' own disciples, many of the people who had initially been attracted to Jesus turned away and no longer went about with him. When only the 12 are left, he asks them, "Do you want to go away as well?" They get to choose: stay with the old, familiar ways of being God's people or follow Jesus into a strange, and perhaps even scary, future in which old and familiar concepts are turned upside down.

Peter answers, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." What Peter is saying is something like, "We choose you because in our relationship with you we have experienced a foretaste of the eternal life you offer us. In our journeying together with you we have come to know you and trust you. Because of our journeying together we believe that you are indeed the Holy One of God."

Jesus' response, "Did I not choose you..." Jesus repeats this again at the last supper reminding his disciples, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (15:16) which I would like to paraphrase as "you choose because I chose you." This takes us back to our Old Testament text. The Israelites chose to serve the Lord because the Lord chose them. The 12 remaining disciples choose Jesus because he chose them.

Jump ahead another 2000 years to this gathering of people here in this place. Why do you choose to be here this morning?

I'm here because 13 years ago I chose to enter seminary as a candidate for ordained ministry. I made that choice finally after about two decades of indecision because my pastor was convinced that God had chosen me. I trusted him and other mentors who said the same thing, even as I wondered "Really?" One thing led to another and here I am every Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and sometimes on Friday and Saturday too.

Maybe you chose to come here this morning because you grew up in the church, because your parents had you baptized as an infant, brought you to Sunday School, sent you to church camp and Confirmation classes, because church members invited you, welcomed you, and encouraged you to get involved, to stay engaged. Like the ancient Israelites you can look back over your life and see God's hand at work. You choose to be here because you have experienced first hand God's grace and mercy. To which Jesus responds: I have chosen you and called you by name."

Maybe you chose to come here this morning because you are looking for God, seeking a word of comfort or encouragement in a world where God seems absent, seeking answers to really tough questions like why my loved one is so sick, why did this innocent child die, why did my spouse

leave me, why am I always so alone, why is God silent, why are my prayers not answered. Maybe you choose to be here because your heart cries, “Lord to whom shall I go?” To which Jesus responds: “I have chosen you and called you by name.”

Maybe you did not choose to come here, but are here because someone else made that decision for you, so you are here anyway. To which Jesus responds: “You did not choose me, I chose you and called you by name.”

Joshua asked the Israelites to choose whether they would serve the LORD or the gods of their ancestors. Jesus asked the twelve to choose whether they would continue following him when many other disciples were turning away. Choosing to serve the LORD, choosing to follow Christ is saying “Yes” to the God who has already chosen us, who loves us and yearns to be in relationship with us, who has given us gifts and strengths to use in making a positive difference in our little corner of the world. The option and ability to choose is a gift and sign of God’s amazing love: God will love us, even if and when we will not love God. God’s love always leaves room for us to choose.

So as we go forth from this place into the world, into our community, our workplace, our school, our neighborhood, our home we take these questions with us. How will we live out the fact that God has chosen each of us, claimed us as beloved sons and daughters, worthy of love and respect, and empowered to make a positive difference in our world? Whom will we serve? Whom will we follow?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, oh LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14). Amen.