

HEBREW SCRIPTURE READING

Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18 Today's Hebrew Scripture contains one of the most familiar lines from the Old Testament, Joshua's charge to "choose this day whom you will serve," combined with his own response, "but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Less well remembered is the context. It is the end of the story of Joshua and the Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land. It is long after the period of invasion and warfare. All the tribes have gathered at Shechem, a point right in the middle of the land and right between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, where Joshua had previously renewed the covenant with the people. He has already spoken to all the leaders in what seemed to be his final words aware that he would die soon. But he speaks again to all the people as a prophet reminding all the people of the mighty acts of God. It is a straightforward, powerful narrative of God's presence with and action on behalf of the people. This was a great moment in the history of Israel, one of those few times when the people got it right. The story stands as an example and a charge to us: Will we serve the Lord or the gods of our times?

EPISTLE

Ephesians 6:10-20 As the letter to the Ephesians and throughout the great cities of Asia Minor draws to a close, the author offers a final extended metaphor for how a person of faith in Jesus as God's own anointed one, Lord over all, might shape the life of believers. The people Paul wrote to were very much a minority group in the first century. The language used to describe their God and Lord was similar to that used to describe imperial officials, especially the emperor. Even the word for their gatherings, 'ekklesiae', was a term for political gatherings at the local level. This letter was written for people for whom their allegiance to Christ set them at conspicuous odds with the allegiances of others in their families and cities. For these folks a certain kind of armor would be exactly what they craved. The armor Paul speaks of is designed to help people hold fast, it is not an armor for aggressive action. Standing fast does not require a person to hurt a neighbor in any way. The armor is to empower believers to withstand the evils that surround and threaten them.

GOSPEL

John 6:56-69-Through this month we have been not only in the Gospel of John, but in Chapter 6 of John's Gospel. The ending of this chapter on bread and spiritual food does not have the proverbial 'happy ending'. Jesus is preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum to people of faith. Jesus knew the Jewish faith and claimed to the Jews that their faith had now been fulfilled by his arrival. He did not try to destroy their faith, but to fill it more full of divine truth. Jesus claims to be the 'bread' that 'came down from heaven' and that the 'one who eats this bread will live forever.' When his life became their own life then they would live forever, just as Jesus was going to live forever. As the teaching got harder, the crowds thinned.

Clarence Jordan visited an integrated church somewhere in the southern United States. He asked the uneducated preacher, "How did the church get this way?" The pastor explained the message he preached: "If you're one with Jesus, you're one with all kinds of folks. And if you ain't, you ain't."

"What happened?" Jordan asked.

"Well," the preacher said, "the deacons took me into the back room and told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preaching no more. So I fired them deacons! Then I preached that church down to four. And not long after that it grew and grew and grew. And I found out that revival sometimes don't mean bringing people in, but gettin' the people out who don't love Jesus."

Jesus keeps stretching our faith. "You have come this far, come a little farther. You love these people, now open your arms to these people. You have compassion for the one hurting person in front of you, now broaden that compassion to all hurting people in God's world." Jesus is continually trying to remold us into his likeness. Jesus knew his teachings would be difficult in a fallen world. He never promised us an easy time. He promised us his presence.

The lectionary tools for these readings suggest a sermon on the reading from Ephesians and it's a good one. In that epistle reading, Paul exhorts us all to 'put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.' In the Old Testament and Gospel readings for this morning, I find examples of men 'strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,' men Paul might have used as examples. Joshua and Jesus.

Much to the chagrin of my Navy husband, I am still a proud Army brat. Growing up in the Army was a wonderful experience. We moved frequently and my parents made each move exciting. We would camp or stop at a motel with a pool between new homes, stop and see points of interest. I have always loved history so stopping to see the Eisenhower Museum or Mount Vernon were highpoints for me. And we always loved the time we spent in Saco visiting grandparents and the beach. I loved the moves, not so much the new home. My favorite place was always the last place we lived. The last place was where I had friends, knew my teachers, the librarian, the neighbors. For a painfully shy girl, the new home was full of terror, the unknown, and for the first several months I hated it.

I can empathize with the Israelites who discovered wandering through the desert that perhaps slavery was not too high a price to pay for the familiar, for safety, for a settled home. The place of belonging, even if it is in bondage may be better than wandering about, unsettled, homeless, hungry and unknown. They are being asked to start lives in a new land, with different promises, different expectations, different dreams and a new understanding of God. How many of them looked longingly over their shoulders as Joshua admonished them to choose, "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..." How many looked over their shoulders and back at Joshua. How many were pulled by the gods of their ancestors on the other side of the river where they remembered life was better? Over their shoulders to the ancestral gods, tied geographically to the land they protected guaranteeing security and abundance to all who lived within their embrace; back to Joshua. And Joshua? Who was Joshua?

His name was Hosea, meaning 'salvation'. He began his life with them, in the slavery of Egypt. With them, he also witnessed the supernatural plagues and the miracle of Israel's escape from Egypt. He led the Israeli troops to victory over the Amalekites. Moses changed Hosea's name to Joshua, meaning "God saves" or "God gives victory". Joshua, alone, went up the holy mountain with Moses when Moses went to receive the sacred tablets of law. And it was Joshua who stood guard at the temporary tent of meeting before the tabernacle was built. Joshua was one of the 12 spies sent into Canaan. He, representing his tribe of Ephraim, and Caleb, representing his tribe of Judah, were the only two sent to survey the land who were ready to carry out God's will. The rest of their generation, including Moses, would die before passing into the promised land. Moses died after passing everything on to Joshua who God promised to guide and strengthen just as he had Moses. As the leader of God's army, the administrator of God's division of the land, and as God's spokesman, Joshua was faithful as God's chosen servant. When Joshua stood at Shechem, where before him Abraham had built an altar to God, and challenged the Israelites to choose, 'but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.' The people answered, "...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 the way that we went...Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

This same name meaning salvation was given to Mary's first born son. The Greek form of Joshua is Jesus. The name identified him as the servant of God who would complete what God did for Israel through the first Joshua, overcome all powers of evil in the world and bring God's people into their eternal rest. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them...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." Some of the disciples were offended or found Jesus teaching too difficult and turned away. But the words to take away from today's readings are, "Abide in me." Jesus invited the disciples to be at home in him, just as he is at home in God. Home is the promise of safety, of security. Like Joshua, Jesus turned to those remaining and gave them a choice. Jesus asked the 12, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered for them all, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

In their decisions not to turn back, the people with Joshua, the twelve with Jesus were drawn together as communities of faith. It was not any creed, mission statement, style of worship, or service program that united them. It was their acceptance of the one true God, their willingness to follow Jesus Christ that made them a community of faith. It is our commitment to follow Christ alongside others that makes us the people of God.