

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 14 – August 30th and September 2nd, 2012

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 (NIV -2011)

Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people,

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God. ”

In the name of our Savior, dear friends,

“To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...you are the Holy One of God.”

It is an amazing confession, the bold words of a bold disciple. Others had left. They had found the words of Jesus to be objectionable- too difficult, too strange, too different from what they had always heard. Not Peter. He stood with the other eleven. They didn't want to go anywhere else. They didn't need anyone else. **“To whom shall we go? You, Jesus, have the words of eternal life.”**

To whom shall we go? Don't we desire to confess with Peter that we receive from Jesus, through his Word in the Bible, eternal life? Don't we always want to hold firmly to the conviction that he is indeed the Holy One of God, our Lord and Savior? Or to say it another way, don't we always want to serve the Lord? Then let us be encouraged by the example of Joshua and of the Israelites to boldly confess:

Theme: We Will Serve The LORD!

- 1. God's leaders will be an example for us**
- 2. God wants to be #1 in our hearts**

As our first lesson from Joshua 24 records, Joshua first made this confession. God had chosen Joshua to lead the Israelites after the death of Moses. Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, winning great military victories over the Canaanite people who were there before. Joshua was the leader as the people witnessed God's miracles on their behalf as the walls of Jericho fell before them and as the Jordan River stopped in its tracks to allow them to cross.

By the time of our text, the Israelites were settling into their allotted portions of the Land. Joshua was getting quite old and knew that he was likely near death. In a final official act as their leader, Joshua assembled the tribes at Shechem. He reminded them how the Lord had chosen them, the descendants of Abraham, to be his very own people. He reviewed with them how the Lord had rescued his people from Egypt and now had brought them to the land he had promised. Joshua led the people to renew the covenant that God had established with them. God had promised the people that if they remained faithful, if they obeyed his teaching and instruction, they would live blessed lives in the Promised Land.

And Joshua led by example as well. Before the Israelites had settled in the Promised Land, Joshua was one of twelve spies sent to explore the land and report about it. But he was one of only two who had the confidence that God would keep his promises and lead the Israelites into the land. He stood up and faithfully confessed the Lord at a time when many refused. As the leader of God's people, no doubt Joshua faced many similar challenges, but he was renowned for his faithful obedience to God.

And at the end of his life, Joshua again confessed the faith that God had given to him, saying, **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."** Joshua intended to remain faithful. He would do all within his power to see that those God had entrusted to him would do the same. As leader of God's people, he encouraged them. As head of his household, he would continue to encourage his own family.

It is good for us to thank God for faithful leaders like Joshua. It is good for us to thank God for the pastors and teachers who have instructed us in God's Word and encouraged us to remain faithful. It is good for us to remember with thanks the faithful parents who brought us to the waters of Holy Baptism, who taught us Bible stories and songs like "Jesus loves me." And it is good for us to consider those over whom God has given us authority: children, students, young people for whom we can set an example. Do we commit ourselves to doing all we can so that they remain faithful? Do we commit ourselves to preaching, teaching, and speaking God's Word to them? Do we constantly strive to set a positive example for them to follow? God bless us in our efforts.

For the Israelites, this meeting at Shechem was an opportunity to recommit themselves to serving the Lord. Joshua's encouragement to them was, **"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness."** The Hebrew translated "all faithfulness" literally says, "in completeness and in truth." And that is exactly the sort of service that God asks from his people and deserves from those he created. Luther says in his explanation to the first commandment, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Serving God in faithfulness and in truth allows nothing to get in the way of such service.

That is why Joshua urged the people to throw away their false Gods. Their ancestors had seen the many false gods of the Egyptians, and they had come to a new land with all sorts of pagan practices and false gods. There would be temptations, there would be struggle, but the people were to commit themselves to putting away their false gods and serving and worshipping the Lord.

And the people were moved by God to do exactly that. They proclaimed, **"Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! ...We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God."** Today, God's Word invites us to make the same confession. It urges us to recommit ourselves to serving and worshipping God in truth and faithfulness.

There are many idols that would gladly tempt us away from God. Money, fame, glory, honor, respect are just some of them. We don't build physical altars to these idols, but when we let them take away from our wholehearted service to God, we are building altars to them in our hearts. There are many ways that we have failed to serve God as he would have us. When we refuse to obey our parents and listen to our teachers with respect. When our own comfort and entertainment become more important than the tasks God has assigned to us, or when we are lazy about accomplishing our responsibilities.

Satan is hard at work against us every day, along with his allies in the world and within our own sinful natures. It is no wonder that we are encouraged to recommit ourselves to serving the Lord. Of course, this encouragement comes only on the basis of what God has already done for us. Our service to God does not earn points for us or convince God to love and bless us. Our service to God is a response to the love that he has already shown to us. In love, he sent his Son to be our Savior and to defeat for us our enemies sin, death, and hell. In love he raised Jesus to life to assure us of our forgiveness. In love he sends his Holy Spirit to us in Word and Sacrament so that we have faith in him and his promises.

And now in faith, we choose to serve faithfully. Some mistakenly believe that when our text says, **"choose for yourselves,"** it means that people are able to make the choice whether to believe in God and serve him entirely on their own, as easily as they choose what clothes they will wear or what they will eat. The Bible makes it clear that this is not the case. The people of Israel were believers. God

had already turned their cold hearts to him in love and had planted faith in them. The entire work of creating faith is God's work, without any effort or assistance from us. But in love, he now gives us opportunities to exercise and to demonstrate our faith by the way we live. He invites us to live as people who earnestly desire to remain faithful to him always.

And there are many opportunities to recommit ourselves to serving the Lord in faith. When believers come before the altar and in front of the congregation for confirmation, they are recommitting themselves to serving the Lord. By maintaining our membership in a church that consistently teaches the true Word of God, we are reaffirming our faith. When we make a priority of weekly worship attendance, we are recommitting ourselves to serving God. When we study the Bible consistently, we are doing what the Lord encourages us to do.

The Israelites followed the example of Joshua and confessed their faith. Peter in our Gospel today boldly confessed his faith. At times their faith wavered as it was attacked with temptations of all sorts, but they ultimately relied on God to grant them strengthening and faithfulness. We pray that we may do the same as we confess our fervent desire to remain faithful throughout our lives. We will serve the Lord.