

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Psalm 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-59

08/26/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said,] 56“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This 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.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum 60When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, “For this reason I have told

you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” 66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Let us pray,

Amen

Loyalty

Good morning! I had a choice to make... Whom would I serve... On one side: hope and all that was good in the world. When the rest of the world seemed impossible and unmanageable, this choice shone with the light of all the best that existed here on earth. The other option... well that path, my friends, was one of darkness and evil. Sure, it masqueraded as the “better,” more “centered” option... But I knew it was a lie. Sure, when I was younger, before I knew the danger of what I was doing, it had seemed OK, but now I knew the Truth, and the Truth would set me free. So, physically tired, mentally exhausted, and emotionally drained I reached for another cup of coffee, forgoing the herbal tea right next to it. Sure, the heart palpitations were now noticeable, but if I was going to survive my first finals’ week at Wheeling Jesuit University, I was going to need the coffee. I had a decision to make, and for me and my house, we shall serve that wonderful roasted bean, nice and hot from the pot.

We're going Old Testament today. Our first reading this morning comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically the book of Joshua. In the middle of July as I looked forward to the texts we would have in the summer I felt that I would hardly be the only one who was less than thrilled with the idea that we would be having another Bread of Life text. After I read the words from Joshua I was convinced that this was where I felt we were called to go. We pick up the story at the very end of the story. Joshua will die soon, but not before one last commitment to the Lord with all of the Israelites gathered together in one place. It's a question of loyalty, of trust and commitment.

We all face challenges to those loyalties: coffee vs. tea, Ford vs. Chevy, the Pittsburgh Steelers vs. disappointment, Ferrari vs. Lamborghini, Coke vs. Pepsi, the beach or the mountains, Heinz Ketchup vs. whatever other brand some insane person would make. Some are fun and simple, others are far more serious. This job or that job, pay this bill or that bill, this college or that one...

In Joshua's story today it's God (big G) vs gods (little g). Who will you serve?

Here's a little insider baseball though, the Israelites had been forced to make this same decision already back in the eighth chapter. The consequences were a little different that first time, different in that it wasn't really even spelled out. Here at the end of the book of Joshua the results are much more severe. Something has changed for the Israelites by our reading today.

Scholars were quick to notice the change too, noting grammatical nuances and the different writing style. Most modern scholarship agrees that this was the product of reflection on

the part of the Israelites sometime during or after the exile. In roughly the year 587 B.C.E. The conquering empire of Babylon hauled off the nation as slaves to a different country. It was there that some Israelites, a generation or two later, started to notice that the children of the exile had gotten a little wishy-washy about worshipping God. So the writer, looking at a context where the consequences of abandoning God were very obvious, writes that they need to take this seriously. They can't back down again.

“Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” 21And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” 22Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” 23He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” 24The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” 25So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day...”¹

Joshua gives them several chances to say no, it's a deliberate attempt to remind the Israelites that they can't worship those other gods.

“But Pastor Tim,” you say, “this is all well and good, but we don't believe in any of the Mesopotamian or Babylonian gods of the ancient Middle East!” And while that's true, it's also true that our gods have taken many different forms in our current world. We worship the gods of military might, vanity, and wealth. We think WE can be the gods now, that the power to fix all

¹ Joshua 24:19-25a (NRSV)

our problems lies only within ourselves. We've turned away from God just as much as the Israelites lost in exile.

But take heart, for all is not lost. If you feel crushed under the hammer of the law take heart! You will hear the good news, just wait a little longer. Because there's another interesting little detail in the story that is super easy for someone in the 21st century to completely miss. One commentator writes the following:

"As the head of his household... Joshua not only speaks for all men, women, and children in his charge, but he has also decided for them what they will do. The 'people' who respond are not the whole populace, each individual speaking for himself or herself, but the 'elders, heads, judges, and officials'"²

I guess I just always imagine Joshua going down the line of every Israelite, waiting on some verbal yes or some nod of the head. But that isn't the case, Joshua decides as the leader of this tribe that they will follow the Lord.

So what does Joshua decide will happen? Well, the Hebrew in verse 14 is translated *"Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness."* A better translation might be integrity and faithfulness. Sincerity can often be too subjective for our tastes.³ We, along with the Israelites, are called to respond to God, to live lives that reflect love and commitment that has been shown to us for thousands of years through the saving actions of a God who just refuses to let us go.

²Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume II*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 129

³Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume II*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 129

So I promised you some good news, and here it is. As the Called and Ordained minister of the Church of Christ and of St. Paul's Lutheran Church I have decided for you! Yes, you will serve the Lord. From now on you will serve with integrity, sincerity, and faithfulness. As the writer of Ephesians reminds us: *"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine"*⁴, that God is working to strengthen us for service towards God and one another. What happens if you fail? Well, you just let me worry about that. I take that anxiety away from you, focus only on the good that God has enacted in the world through you, respond in love, respond with compassion, respond by clinging to the promise that God gave to Joshua in the beginning of his ministry saying: *"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. **6** Be strong and courageous..."*⁵ God believes in you, I believe in you, that sure sounds like Good News to me. Amen.

⁴ Ephesians 3:20 NRSV

⁵ Joshua 1:5b-6a NRSV