

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, November 8, 2020

Joshua 24: 1-3A, 14-25

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac;

“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

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; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for 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 all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.” But 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. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” Then 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.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

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This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I don't know about y'all, but I have quite intentionally been taking mental journeys over the past several days, turning the pages of that giant photo book that lives in my memory, zeroing in on those places that evoke comfort, or even transcendence.

A little over four years ago, my extended family took a big trip to Ireland — the place of the ancestors — a place my grandmother had dreamt of visiting for many, many years.

It was a trip that I will forever be grateful for, but a few days into it — after our large, intergenerational group had spent a couple of nights in Dublin, in a badly chosen hotel, perched above a pub, and meandered our way across the country on cliff-side roads where it is unfathomable to me that we don't hear about more tour buses falling off of them—

we arrived at our “home base” for the duration of the vacation — jet lagged, motion sick, and having lost our filters.

And it was raining and chilly.

So the womenfolk in our group meandered through town, trying to get acquainted, most of us in baseball caps having given up on our hair, bickering about silly things and moaning about the clouds, not looking more than a few feet in front of us —

And with a stroke of luck — or providence — my 15-year-old cousin caught sight of a little cottage-like shop just a way's off the beaten trail — and we made our way to what turned out to be a little art gallery — the painter and her easel—both covered in paint — set up in a corner, and the rest of the brightly lit space *full* of vivid painting and after painting after painting *of water*: Shallow water, deep water, calm water, raging water. All the colors water could possibly reflect from sunrise to high noon to dusk to sunset and in any given season.

It was a place you had to move about slowly, sort of suspended in time.

We had spread out, each of us taking a different path around the gallery, our attention captured by different paintings, but our hearts captured by the totality of the space and the way it transported us somewhere else.

When my aunt and I bumped into each other, her shaky voice betrayed her as she struggled to name the surprise and embarrassment she felt at being so deeply moved in this space: “I don't know what is going on here, Sara, but I feel like I could cry!”

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Moments later we were deep in conversation with the artist, Carol, whose warmth and ease and depth reflected her paintings. She was a native to Dingle, Ireland, and had spent many years abroad, painting landscapes, but the water itself kept calling her back until she submitted to its claim.

We probably lingered for an hour in that gallery, and only peeled away after promising Carol that we each planned to have one of her paintings hanging above our fireplaces just as soon as we pay off the trip to Ireland itself. For now, she would need to accept payment in the form of applause and a few self-conscious tears.

Suspended in time as we were, transported as we were, the biggest portion of the blessing was what it did for us as we moved on. The paintings that were *so transcendent* in fact were paintings of the waters that physically surrounded us — so as we moved out of the gallery and back into “the real world” we did so with a shifted perspective. Ultimately, it turned our gaze back to what we were there for. It lifted us, giving us a shared something to gush over, and it made us mindful of the beauty that surrounded us. Beauty that we were apparently worthy of.

I imagine many if not all of you arrived for worship today — whether in the sanctuary or virtually — with a yearning to be transported elsewhere. “The real world” has been real enough for the past several days, thank you very much. Let’s just stop and be here for a moment.

In one of his books, Orthodox priest Robert Havda, reminds his readers that in the Orthodox Christian community — the oldest living one there is — “...when the assembly gathers, they have ‘stopped’ chronological time and entered a different reality.”

But the time stoppage is not an end in itself. In today’s, preparation for worship words, Robert Haavda exhorts us: “Worship is not an escape from the world, rather it is arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world.”

In an Orthodox worship service, everything and everyone is placed in a particular way, in a way that communicates our relationship to God and the reign of God, and the world that we live in.

The sanctuary which contains the holy altar is separated from the nave, where the worshippers gather by a panel that is covered with icons. The placement of the icons and the way that the panel separates the sanctuary from the nave indicates *where we stand in the here & now* between the first and second comings of Christ.

An Orthodox Church is a rather enchanting place. Sometimes it’s been accused by many in our own tradition of being too enchanting. But all of that other-worldliness meant to give a foretaste of God’s glory and the Resurrection of all things at the end of time ultimately reorients us in the present. It redirects our attention to where we stand in this in-between time where there is still work to be done. Where the reign on earth as it is in heaven it is not yet complete.

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We often refer to this in-between time as “already, not yet,” meaning the Kingdom of God has come close most uniquely and profoundly in Jesus it is an indwelling reality that reveals itself wherever the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed and the violence is exposed and the truth is told *and it is very much beyond us*, a vision we keep before us a vision, with an invitation, that empowers us to keep on keepin’ on in this world that is still so broken.

Places of worship are intentional in their placement of the people, and the things that aid worship. For the Orthodox, a clear communication of where we stand between the first and second comings. Already, not yet.

In our reading from the Book of Joshua this morning, we encounter a people who have also been brought to an intentional place for an important decision. Schechem was the place where God appeared to Abram, promising him long, long before these liberated Hebrews made it to the promised land, that he would be blessed with land and with descendants that were like the stars.

Hebrew scholar Anathia Portier-Young also reminds her readers that not insignificantly, Schechem has also been designated a city of refuge, “a haven that interrupts and transforms a landscape marred by violence and revenge...

Joshua now gathers the people in this city that orients them to the boundary between justice and mercy and beside the altar that commemorates God’s revelation and promise and their ancestor’s worshipful response. At the moment of decision, the people are surrounded by physical reminders of God’s revelation and promise and oriented by their own shared practices of worship, justice, and mercy.”

The radicalness of the direction Joshua puts to them is betrayed its seeming simplicity:
Choose this day whom you will serve.

If the people thought it was an easy answer, Joshua’s immediate response is pretty sobering. He straight up tells them, “*you cannot; he is jealous God!*” He seems to make the case that it is better to serve other gods than to serve the one true God with anything less than total integrity.

The language in this text — taken out of context as it often is and adorning the walls of many of our homes— may make this story sound a little trite to some ears — but the decision was arguably the most consequential the Israelites ever made. And the moment of decision, brimming with tension —a tension that Joshua wanted them to feel in their bones.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

It’s informative that Joshua didn’t denigrate the lesser gods— the many gods that the Hebrews’ own ancestors worshipped. He freely allows the truth that we all need something to serve — some guiding power or principle that gives us grounding, and direction, and hope. If

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you're not going to serve the Lord, he says, then at least choose today whom you will serve—whether it's the old gods of our ancestors or these new contemporary gods that we've met among the Amorites.

I can hear 21st century North American Joshua saying something similar: choose something. Something that makes it clear you're not god in your own life. Maybe it's a cause; maybe it's your country or your city; maybe it's your church; maybe it's a self-help guru or a particular mantra or practice. Choose something.

But if you choose to serve The Lord — then you should know what you're getting into. Because the Lord our God is a jealous God. And any other service you render—even good forms of service— will need to take a back seat. People who serve God *serve God* — and God's truth— and God's way— first. Every time, and in every facet of their individual and collective lives. There is no opting “out.” There is no domesticating of this. There's no spiritualizing it away. There is no deciding that God has nothing to say about this or that. There is no escaping God's sovereignty over all the things. So choose today whether you can do that. Whether you want to do that.

Sometimes I wonder if God in God's all knowingness knew (or feared?) what a monotheistic worldview could become if it was lukewarm in its compassion and commitment, but armored up with confidence.

And so the moment of decision and a moment with a genuine choice. It wasn't coerced. Joshua didn't use a fear tactic to elicit a faithful response from the Israelites. He said they could worship the other gods that they should, in fact, if they determined that worshipping the Lord was simply too much. He didn't say that to worship other things inevitably led to death or destruction; he didn't say there was anything inherently bad about them.

They simply weren't the God who liberated the people from slavery, bringing them out of Egypt and through the wilderness and into a land brimming with hope.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

This was a moment of great import for the Israelites. It wouldn't be the last for the generations that came after, but for this generation, it was profound. In verses 31 it tells us:

Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.

So, for many years, the people made good on the decision they made that day. We can lift this up and celebrate it as a time when the people of God got it right.

For us, these moments of decision come at different times. There are the most obvious times: baptism, confirmation, a reaffirmation of faith when one joins a different congregation.

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But these moments also come when we feel a shift...and need to repent, or recommit, or simply remind ourselves to whom *we* belong. Whom we answer to, ultimately. Whom we look to first.

It's likely that all of us come to worship today with the feeling that something has shifted on the heels of a long election week and results that finally came yesterday.

And whether you come with disappointment,
or fear,
or great relief,
or a healing wound,
or hope—

you come as a *child of God* and you stand before God surrounded even if in your imagination by “physical reminders of God’s revelation and promise, oriented by this community’s own shared practices of worship, justice, and mercy.”

And you and we have a decision to make and it’s a decision we would make no matter the candidate that made the victory speech last night.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Thanks be to God