

### **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.

"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.

### **“Inclining Our Hearts”**

This past week while I was studying our text of the Israelites at Shechem, the final scene of the movie “The Truman Show” popped into my head. In the movie a man named Truman was raised and filmed since birth in a make believe world orchestrated to function around him. His live became a hit TV series. Both creator and cast of the show declare to viewers that Truman is free to make his own choices in the world created for him. But it only takes a viewer a few minutes of airtime to realize that Truman’s life is anything but his choice. The cast advertises commercials as they interact with him and he often senses that something is wrong in his world. But creator and cast work diligently to keep him from discovering truth.

In the final scene of the movie viewers watch as Truman attempts to escape his bubble world in a sailboat. The creator of the show tries to waylay Truman and almost drowns him. Truman is resolute though. He makes it to the end of everything he has ever known. As he is about to leave the creator’s voice booms from the sky urging him to go back, claiming there is nothing better out in the “real world.” But Truman walks out a door choosing to live in an unknown world rather than be controlled. Truman knew what life was in the bubble world. He looked forward to what lay ahead of him. Making choices, defining his life for himself. Truman wanted out of that perfectly ordered world that

surrounded and catered to him. Most of humanity throughout time has dreamed that we would love such a place, but it would get boring quickly.

Israel was given an opportunity to self define at the Shechem assembly. After reciting God's history with them, Joshua called on Israel to respond by declare their allegiance to God or other gods. He knew the people would be faced with many choices and temptations to worship other gods as they scattered and settled in the land.

The crossing of the Jordan, gave this generation of Israelites the assurance that God was with them, going out in front of them as God had done in the past. Today's reading and covenant renewal gave Israel the opportunity to voice their obedience and trust in God. The scriptures show us that each generation of God's people faced particular challenges to their faith. Each needs to be assured of God's story with the world. Faith and its challenges are not transferred from generation to generation by osmosis.

Joshua's speech calls for choices and response from Israel. "Incline your hearts" Joshua calls to the people. Unlike the creator of Truman's world who sought to bind up humanity for the purpose of profit and to create the sense that somewhere there is a secure world, Israel proclaimed a Creator of all. One God motivated by covenantal love. So Joshua gathered the people before God at Shechem and charged them. Israel must reject all other gods and commit to worship and serve the God of Israel alone. Both Joshua and later Jewish editors of Israel's story of faith stress that God, whose promises are unfailing, demands fidelity in return. "Revere the Lord, serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness....chose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

If you are going to choose God Joshua says, then you must work intentionally to serve God every day. It's time to "put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD." The heart, in ancient times, was understood to be the decision-making center of an individual; seat of mind and will.<sup>1</sup>

At first I thought to myself that Joshua's charge was completely irrational. Of course the people are going to fall short and sin. In the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition has there ever been any hope that we humans would be able to perfectly follow God? But perhaps this is exactly why we need texts like Joshua's charge to Israel. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote about this text claiming, "Joshua warns the people that this choice will bring them a bunch of trouble. If they want to be in on the story of (God's) abundance, they must put away their foreign gods."<sup>2</sup> You cannot worship God alone and also cling to other gods in times of fear.

Israel's response is based on of God's faithfulness and covenantal love. They respond to what God has done and seek to live in faith. Joshua's charge, Israel's response and God's history with Israel in the Old Testament show that hope in God is always well placed, even if in the long run we fall short of living faithfully in the lands we reside in. If we are not challenged, we forget to tell and share the story and in doing so, we neglect thinking critically about our beliefs match the way we live our lives.

Who are the other gods of our land? No matter where we live on earth, we are living in God's reign and creation. We are called to reject our society's gods if they are at odds with God's call to Christian living. Our text is calling out to us put away the gods of whatever land we live in! This is easier said than done though. The church has battled against cultural idolatry sneaking into our corporate and individual lives in every place and time.

Like the Truman show's creator we in America tend to worship the gods who proclaim we can create a safe haven within which to live our lives. Something must be within our control! Joshua knew that God's people would be left hopeless in the land were it not for the regular recital of what God has done for them. They needed a call to respond to God in their daily living. Left to our own devices today, why not pray to the other gods of the land, build a fortress to protect us, and stockpile our abundant resources for a future that the world tells us is unknown? The problem is these gods are not God. They provide immediate, but not long term, relief to the anxieties of today's world while God has set us free to live in love and abundance till our Messiah returns. We are to take advantage of every opportunity to define ourselves as Christians who live freely not because this world is safe, but because our hope is placed in God and what God will do in the future.

God empowers us to see beyond other gods and discern for ourselves how we will live in obedience to the good news we have been given through Jesus Christ. As recorded by the gospel of John, Jesus claimed, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) Life abundant is not about goods or resources; it is about freedom to live into God's call upon our lives. Might inclining our hearts be a call to discernment about and sometimes rejection of the gods of our land?

Our Children's Advent service this year will take place on December 11. We were looking for a new theme this year anyways, so we decided to take a little break from our Christmas pageant and concentrate on helping our children (and us adults) refocus on what Advent is all about. In Advent, we anticipate our Savior's coming, remembering Jesus' birth in a stable or cave. Remembering that Jesus came in humility to serve. In preparation for his coming and remembrance of his birth, the children will be leading us in songs and liturgy that remind us of our humble Savior. We'll have the opportunity to dress in "costumes" simple clothes and to bring gifts of socks and mittens to the stable where Jesus was born as an offering of preparation and anticipation. You won't want to miss being led in this meaningful service this Advent. We have the opportunity to remember anew with fresh eyes God's incarnation. Reorienting ourselves may seem a little weird after years and years of Christmas festivities and commercial hype starting after Halloween from the marketplace, but the results for our faith will be worth it.

The life of faith is one of inclining our hearts to God's call, rehearsing the story of God with the world, proclaiming what we believe through our actions, and being renewed by God's spirit at work in us. Jesus himself said, "Do not fear, only believe." Faith is lived by putting one foot in front of the other as we boldly incline our hearts toward God's will and live into our beliefs. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Historical meaning of this saying was drawn from a footnote from the HarperCollins New Revised Standard (Study) Version.

<sup>2</sup> "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," Walter Brueggemann, *The Christian Century*, 1999. As found on <http://www.textweek.com/history/josh24b.htm>.