

Sermon: August 23, 2009

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-2; 14-18
John 6:56-69

Title: Making Choices

THEN JOSHUA GATHERED ALL THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL TO SHECHEM...

Do you know how important that little word “Then” is in this passage? Most of us would read right over it, passing it off as a simple adverb, having no other meaning than to introduce us to the rest of the sentence. But I want to suggest to you this morning that this little word “then”, is the key upon which the rest of the story hinges. Let’s try an experiment. Let’s read the sentence without the “then” in it.

JOSHUA GATHERED ALL THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL TO SHECHEM...

Sounds good enough, does it not. We get the message that Joshua called together all the tribes of Israel and as the next line indicates this included the elders, heads, judges and officers of Israel. Must have been a pretty awesome gathering! What had begun as a single couple: Abraham and Sarah, had now, in the matter of 1500 years become a vast confederation of tribes who had two things in common: They all venerated Abraham and Sarah as their ancestor of origin, and, they all held some level of commitment to the God of Abraham and Sarah. So, we can see that even without the little “then” beginning the sentence, it carries quite a punch.

The only trouble is that’s not how it is written. The passage begins “Then, Joshua gathered the tribes of Israel to Shechem.... And it is that little word at the beginning that gives this passage an even greater impact.

Webster notes that the little adverb “then” has the effect of saying:

At that time

Soon after that, next in order of time

Following next after this in order of position

In that case, under those circumstances

As a necessary and logical consequence, consequently

So, when we read the passage as written, we need to pay some attention to the “then”. It tells us that Joshua called this gathering after everything that had preceded in the life of the Israelite people. Then.... after the trek through the wilderness. After the death of Moses.... After the struggles with the indigenous tribes in Moab and Amon... then, after all it took to cross the Jordan and conquer the city of Jerhico Only after all this,.... And in response to all this.... Joshua calls the people together. This gathering wasn’t done in a vacuum. It was done out of reaction to everything that the twelve tribes of Israel had experienced over the past two generations. From Slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea, and the desert trails to Sinai, to Moses’ receiving the Ten commandments, to the aborted attempt to enter the land, only to be turned back to spend another generation in the wilderness, to the struggles with native tribes and finally Moses passing the mantel of leadership off to Joshua. All of this is wrapped up in that little word “then”.

So, when you read a passage that begins with “then” or “therefore” or “however” , look at what that word reflects. You will discover a wealth of God’s Grace wrapped up in that little word. And so it was for Joshua. Having reminded the tribes of their history and their trials and tribulations as well as how God sustained them in the journey, Joshua lays before them a challenge.

***NOW THEREFORE REVERE THE LORD AND SERVE HIM
IN SINCERITY AND IN FAITHFULNESS***

***NOW IF YOU ARE UNWILLING TO SERVE THE LORD,
CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE...***

***BUT AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE
THE LORD!***

You see, there was some decision making to be done. After all that had taken place, the children of Israel had to decide whom they were going to serve. It wasn't as if they had no other options. There were plenty of options. They could serve Baal. They could serve the Gods of the Ammonites. They could revert to some of the Gods of Egypt, chief among them was Ra. Or, they could simply choose not to choose. They could follow the gods of wealth and success. They could go for the golden ring and worship the God of sensual pleasure. Heaven knows they had lots of options.

The important thing to remember is that decision making is never done in a vacuum. WE decide within the context of what is happening in our lives, within the context of what is happening in our world.

The Gospel of John gives us a good example of deciding that the disciples of Jesus had to make. Jesus was teaching and preaching in the territory around the Sea of Galilee. He entered the synagogue in Capernaum. That is at the far northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. Today, it is nothing but a ruins. I've been there. I've stood among the broken columns that once held up the roof. Later generations of conquerors have carried off most of the stones to use in other buildings. Today, there is an attempt to find the stones and rebuild the Synagogue in Capernaum. But on that day when I stood there looking out over the sea of Galilee I felt a certain sense of foreboding. For it was here that John records Jesus' very powerful words about the flesh and blood of the Son of Man.

I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.”

And the Gospel of John tells us that these words shocked His followers. It was a “hard teaching”. Some of his followers grumbled at this teaching. They grumbled because these words from Jesus left no doubt as to who Jesus was. He came from God and he would return to God and anyone who “ate the flesh and drank the blood” would receive eternal life. Those men and women who had flocked out into the wilderness first to receive Baptism from John, and then to follow the humble Nazareen were confronted with a blatant proclamation.

And, for some of Jesus’ followers this teaching was too difficult to take. They could no longer sit on the fence. It was either both feet in or no feet in. And the scriptures record that from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Whether you are a member of the Hebrew people gathered at Shechem or part of the crowds that followed Jesus and heard his words at Capernaum, you are being challenged every day of your life to choose whom you will serve. Will you serve the God of Abraham and Sarah? Will you choose to follow the One who calls us to partake of His very life?

I was wondering in my mind what it was about Jesus’ words that caused some to turn away. Were they shocked because of the

cannibalistic innuendo in His words? Were they turned off because of the absolute tone of what Jesus said? Were they simply not ready to turn their backs on their Jewish Religious Practices? Were they afraid that in following Jesus, they would have to give up some of the pleasures of life to which they had grown accustomed? Whatever their reasons, they choose to turn away and cease their following.

For the most part, you and I have become accustomed to choosing God and Christ without giving up most of the other choices in life. For instance, we can choose to follow Christ and still earn a good living and have the finer things of life. We can follow Christ and not feel guilty about living abundant lives with all the worldly blessings. And we find ways to share those blessings with other and often times even spend a portion of our time in assisting the less fortunate folk of the world. Therefore, when the call goes out to sign up for Habitat for Humanity, we understand that as part of our choice to follow Christ and share our time and talents and wealth.

In 1936, when Bill and Jessie Junkin graduated from Seminary, they applied to become missionaries in China. They took a slow boat to Hong Kong and from there to the interior of China. But things began to change in a hurry, as the Japanese Army invaded mainland China. Bill and Jessie were instructed by our mission board to leave the country. They almost made it. But somewhere on the South China Sea, they and a number of other foreign missionaries were captured by the Japanese. They spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war compound in the Philippines. Their son, Bill was born in that camp in 1942.

Very few of us will ever be asked to make the kind of choices that Bill and Jessie made. But we will have many choices to make simply because we have decided to be counted among the followers of Christ.

Daily, in our homes, as we interact as husbands and wives, as parents, as children and grandchildren. Simply being called one of Christ's followers changes the dynamic of the decisions we make. Some of the children here this morning are discovering that even in a school setting, it makes a difference that they are counted among God's children. Kids, if your parents carried you forward as a baby and had you baptized, you have much to thank them for. But you also carry a burden. Your baptism is like leaven in the bread that is always working in the dough. As long as you acknowledge your Baptism, you will have to factor that into every decision you make in life.... From what to do on a date, to illegal drinking.... To copying answers off other folks tests.... To how you treat someone in school who is at a disadvantage to you.... a fellow student in a wheelchair, or a fellow student who doesn't fit in... or a fellow student who is a bully.

The scriptures don't really tell us, but I suspect that some of Jesus' followers deserted him because His teaching were hard and they intuitively knew that they would have to make some changes in their lifestyles. So, they left.

One of the sad things about modern Christianity is that most of us feel that we don't have to make any lifestyle changes. Most of believe that we can continue making decisions like we always have made them with the focus on us, instead of on Him.

This coming week every single one of us going to make hundreds of decisions. We will choose the food we eat, the TV programs we watch, the music we listen to on our i-pods, We will choose what clothes we wear to work and school, and we will choose whom we associate with. There may be someone here today who will be making a decision on leaving their present work and getting into something that is less stressful. And perhaps there are some who just wish they had an opportunity to choose new employment. And I'd be willing to bet that a few members of this

congregation are struggling with how to leave their estates to their children and should Altavista Presbyterian Church be included?

You see, what the scriptures tell us this morning (both the Old and the New Testaments) is that decisions are not made in a vacuum, especially for a believer. Because God in Christ lays claim to all of life, not just the little part we want to share with Him. We tend to forget this when we are deciding such issues as “excellence in education for all of our children” and “Health Care benefits for all of God’s Children” and “welcoming the stranger in our gates, even the undocumented alien” and “how do we love those who persecute us and do all manner of evil against us”.... And the list could go on and on.

The very future of human life on this planet may well depend upon how God’s children make important decisions over the next 25 to 50 years. Decisions about food production, about justice for underdeveloped nations, about using war to secure natural resources, about conspicuous consumption by 20% of the world’s population, about developing a truly international economy that treats all workers fairly, about how we who love and worship God in Christ deal with other religious faiths that are antagonistic towards us.

Joshua said it this way: As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Jesus puts it a little differently: turning toward his closest 12 Apostles he says:

YOU DO NOT WANT TO LEAVE TOO, DO YOU?

Far be it from me to tell you how to make choices. I’m struggling with my own choices.

But I know this. Not to decide is to decide. Make your choices in the light of the Love of Jesus Christ and there is no way you can go wrong.

Amen.

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