

Amanda preached last week on Exodus and the ten commandments. Today we're skipping the remainder of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and landing on Joshua. Most of us don't know much about the Book of Joshua in the Bible. It is the one sandwiched in between Deuteronomy and Judges. I'm willing to bet though that many of us recognize vs. 15 that we will read in a minute! And if you are familiar with Joshua, many do not like it, as it mentions harsh, cruel things such as conquering people for the land, genocide, and war- all which are identified with God. I know it makes me very uncomfortable, so I tend to skip over it. However, many scholars say that the history timeline doesn't add up, which is another sermon or Bible study for another day. While some dismiss Joshua, others feel quite the opposite and love this book of the Bible for its reminder that God fulfills God's promises and loves us so much that God fights for us and never gives up on us- no matter where we find ourselves. Regardless of where you stand with this book of the Bible, Joshua begins by mentioning that Moses, Israel's leader whom God chose to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and who also handed out the Ten Commandments, had died before making it to the Promised Land. Joshua, who had been Moses' helper, was approached by God and given the mantle of leadership to serve as the next mediator between God and God's people. Even though Moses claimed he couldn't speak well (Ex. 4:10)- one of the excuses he gave to God- he was known for his speeches, see Deuteronomy for more info, but as we'll see today, Joshua is quite the speech giver as well. And in today's scripture, we pick up at Joshua's last speech right before his death. He has lead them across the Jordan River and into the Promised

Land, dividing it up for the Twelve Tribes of Israel. He has witnessed how the Israelites live and worship or serve other gods. They seem to have forgotten the commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Before we read together I invite us to notice a few things: first, the place is very important- Joshua gathers the Israelites at Shechem- a place of covenant making. Shechem is the same place where after God made God’s covenant with the Israelites through Abram, Abram first worshiped God (Gen. 12:7). Shechem was one of the urban centers in the land of Canaan, and it was marked as a sacred place where worship of the Israelite God began with Abram having an encounter with God and building an altar there. This is a big deal because for seventy-five years, Abraham and his family worshiped the moon god Sin and various idols of wood and gold (v. 2). Then one day God spoke to Abraham and said, “Go ... to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Think of the significance of this: God spoke. This was a God whom Abraham didn’t know, but this God knew him. Today we find Joshua gathering all twelve tribes, including the elders, leaders, judges and officers, for a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. The Israelites- several chapters before today’s story- transition from a people without a home to a settled people. However, like their ancestors, they’re still struggling with worshiping one God. The second thing I invite you to listen for is how Joshua tells his story. He puts God at the center of his story. At every turn, God is the one doing everything. I invite you to also read the remainder of this chapter at a later time. Let us listen to a Word from God through Joshua’s speech and story but before we do that, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Joshua 24:1-15.**

I've seen verse 15 on plaques, shirts, plates, you name it. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Many of us say these words or have them posted for display but what does it look like to really live them out? "I have to admit I had forgotten – the very next verse after vs. 15, when the people said they will serve the Lord, the next verse is 'But Joshua said to the people, 'you cannot serve the LORD.' Joshua and the people then go back and forth – 'yes we can serve the Lord' – 'no you can't, you've got a terrible track record...' Finally they are like, ok, ok we'll give up our other gods, and they renew the covenant with the God of Israel and Abraham, and continue on their way. I wonder, though, if the people were thinking, " this teaching is difficult – who can accept it? ([Nadia Bolz Weber](#))" Or how do we live it out day by day?

Let's look at how Joshua tells this story- with God at the center- emphasizing God's actions in his life. Joshua tells the narrative of salvation again. He reminds the Israelites how God has been at the center of their lives and in response to what God has done and is doing, they can choose to serve Him. How do we put God in the center of our stories? Where have you seen God at work in your life? How does our perspective change when we tell our story with God at the center instead of us? I don't know about you but many times I fail to give God the credit in the moment. Many times it is only by looking back- in retrospect- that I see where God was at work. I say that but I do see God at work here in real time, too.

It took many years for the Israelites to settle into the Promised Land with God's commandments as boundaries for how to live. And God put up with their divided loyalties for all this time but God had fulfilled his promises. "The time had come for the people to choose. God gave them everything. God wanted their full attention. So Joshua gave them a powerful speech reminding them what God had done for them. Then Joshua put it plainly: choose God or walk away" (*Clergy Stuff*). How many of us have divided loyalties or serve other gods? Social media? Technology? Cell phones? Drugs? Work? Alcohol? Sex? Shopping? Sports? Video games? You name the god or idol...whatever you think you own or have control of that actually owns you. Think about it. What if we were to give the time and other resources we give to these things to serving God in response for all God does for us?

Some translations use the word "worship" for "Choose this day whom you will worship" while other translations use the word "serve." Some scholars argue that "serve" is a better translation here because in the context of Joshua, the Israelites remembered when they served as slaves in Egypt but now they were servants of God- very different type of servants. Yet, also notice how serving God is a choice. It is not forced upon anyone. But know this...choosing to serve God it not always easy nor neat and tidy. I witnessed some folks choosing to serve God this morning as they washed away vomit from the church steps. Serving God means loving not just your neighbor but also your enemy.

I was visiting last week with a parishioner who can no longer make it to worship due to his health. He had been reflecting a good deal on his death and on a reunion with his father, grandmother and others who have moved on up in glory. In his reflecting, he was very clear with his words and actions on whom he chooses to serve, as he told of having a limited income and after paying his bills, he gives it to others in need. Some pay him back; others don't. He said, "It don't matter to me because God calls me to love Him and to love my neighbors. As tears welled up in his eyes, he looks at me after apologizing for being emotional and says, "And that's what I'm trying to do for the rest of my days here on this earth. Love God and my neighbor." He knows that Jesus loves and saved him, and he wants others to know that they are also loved by a Redeeming God. Even though he is confined mostly to his home due to his health and no transportation, he finds ways to serve God daily. Why this may not sound profound to you, this parishioner, a veteran, lived for many years in the woods and abused drugs and alcohol. He said that his grandmother taught him how to stretch out George Washington until he screamed. He had jobs, is resourceful, and he's also non-judgmental. He is the painter of today's art piece, and he has asked that it be used for God's glory to help others. Yet, he would be a person many would look at and say that he doesn't have much, but I would argue that he has everything. He would argue the same. Though he has some regrets during his 60+ years on this earth, he knows what a mighty, loving and forgiving God he serves and serve God he does! If you need a Bible, he'll find you one. If you need a kind or a challenging word, he has one. If you are hungry, he will share his Meals on Wheels meal or other

food with you. If you need someone to listen to you or help you put God at the center of your story, he's there. God is whom he chooses to serve every day he is gifted to wake up and go sit all day on his porch listening to the birds sing and watching the trees move- ever so slightly bending to the earth- a sure reminder and sign that God is on the move and hasn't forgotten God's people, including him.

"While we want to believe that the promises we make to God or to one another are sincere and will not be forgotten, the complications of life have a way of making those promises fade. What would it be like if we had opportunities to renew our commitments on a regular basis" (*The Preacher Bible's Handbook*, O. Wesley Allen, Jr.)? Some people do this with renewing marriage vows or baptismal vows. None of us know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future and us. Do we choose to serve the God of Israel...the one who later came with flesh on and moved into the neighborhood in the person of Jesus Christ? What if you found a ritual that works for you to recommit daily, weekly, monthly to serving God? While you're thinking about that, what about we recommit now? Here's what it requires: 1) active participation, 2) acknowledgement of and appreciation for God's acts of salvation and grace, 3) accountability, and 4) an agreement to enter into an alliance with God only. When I ask the question, if you feel so led, please respond, "I will serve the Lord our God!" If you don't feel that way or don't want to speak out loud, that's ok. You can choose. The words only matter if we live them out. Here we go! Whom will we choose to serve this and every day? **I will serve the Lord our God!** May we keep

ourselves immersed in a community of believers that reminds us of who and whose we are...that reminds us that God is at the center of our lives, moving in the leaves of the trees...that reminds us how God has been at work and continues to be at work in our midst- no matter where we find ourselves. So until we move on up in glory, guide us oh thou great Jehovah. Lord, may we continue to recommit ourselves to making your redemptive story the center of our stories and by serving only you!
Amen.