

A poem by Paulo Solari “Choose, choose, choose. To fight or run, to sleep or read, to study or play, to be faithful or promiscuous, to obey or rebel, to yield or resist, to create or destroy, to forgive or resent, to save or to spend, to take risks or be cautious, to dream, to trust. Who will I trust? Who will I serve? Who will I please? The crowd, the fashion the neighbors? For what will I sacrifice...? Choose this day...”<sup>1</sup>

The Israelite people and their leader Joshua are at the end of a very long journey; a journey so long that most of them were not even born when the journey began. Joshua has gathered his people to remind them all they have experienced, and all the Lord their God has done for them. He delivers to them a message from God. Most of this message was removed from the lectionary reading of our text this morning. Verses 4-13 are skipped, most likely to keep the reading to a reasonable length. But I thought I would share it with you: “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; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir [sear] to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. When you

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<sup>1</sup> Susan A Blain, ed., *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, vol. 3 (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), 68.

went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.”

For this morning I am going to put aside the issues I have with theology that says God not only condones warfare but instigates it in order to forcibly remove people like the Amorites and the Canaanites from their land, so the Israelites can occupy the land God promised to them. The overarching message of these verses in the text is that God has been faithful to the Hebrew people. God has delivered them from slavery, provided food and water for them in the wilderness, continued to guide them along their long and arduous journey, and forgives them over and over and over again when they act like ungrateful brats.

The people are at a turning point in their history. They are free, and they are home. The Lord their God has been with them through thick and thin. Joshua tells the Israelites that now they have to make a choice, once and for all. They can either serve the Lord, the God of Israel or they can serve other gods, but they can't do both. After a powerful speech like the one Joshua just delivered, how could they say no to worshipping the Lord? Enthusiastically they say “Yes! We will worship the Lord!”

What does it mean to serve the Lord? Put away other gods. Most of us aren't tempted to worship the god Martu, one of the gods of the Amorite people. Plus, in progressive Christian circles, many of us hold a theology that there is only one God and it doesn't matter what name or identity someone might give to that divine being or that holy mystery. This entity that is greater than us is too great to possibly be contained and defined by our human labels.

While our problem may not be worshipping idols in the way Joshua and the ancient Israelites may have been thinking, we are certainly guilty of worshipping other types false gods as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. Last week a small

church in Sutherland, Texas suffered the loss of 25 members of their faith family. I am sure that there are many different views, even in *this* church, about the place of guns in society. But when we as a country are willing to accept the deaths of 25 people in Texas last week, 58 people in Las Vegas only a few weeks ago, 20 elementary school children 5 years ago and more in exchange for not making any changes to our gun laws, I think it is fair to say we as a country may be guilty of worshiping a false god of guns.

Also in the news this week is the seemingly endless parade of powerful men who are being called out for their acts of sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse. People every industry like actor Kevin Spacey, Olympic team doctor Larry Nassar, former state Judge and current candidate for the US Senate Roy Moore. It seems to me that in this story we are actually seeing our society rejecting a false god. The false god of power, of silence of not believing the victim because the accused person is powerful and well-respected. We are beginning to put away those gods and instead serve our Holy God as we create an environment that no longer tolerates abuse regardless of someone's position in life.

Money is one of the most obvious false gods in our world. Worshiping money has been an issue for as long as money has existed. This issue was important enough to Jesus that he called out the worship of money as a false god. In his sermon on the mount Jesus warned those listening to not store up treasures on earth but instead focus on the treasures of heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. He continued to teach them saying "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Not all of our false gods are so big and obvious. Some of us wrestle with the false god of busyness. We worship being busy. Packed calendars, lots of activities, running from one thing to the next. Working longer hours than most western countries as a way of proving our worth. Our kids have less and less free time and more and more activities than ever before. For some of us, being busy has become a god. I once saw a bumper sticker that read "if you are too busy to pray, then you are busier than God wants you to be." Sometimes the gospel shows up on the back of a Honda Civic.

Sometimes, our false gods are our emotions. Anger, resentment, holding grudges, prejudice, jealousy, envy, impatience, arrogance. These things get in the way of being loving, forgiving, grace-filled, generous, patient, humble. I'm not saying it's not ok to be angry for example, when we allow these negative emotions to dominate our actions and our being, it interferes with living in a way that serves God. I am reminded of the parable of two wolves. A grandfather is talking with his grandson and he says there are two wolves inside of us which are always at war with each other. One of them is a good wolf which represents things like kindness, bravery, and love. The other is a bad wolf, which represents things like greed, hatred, and fear. The grandson stops and thinks about it for a second then he looks up at his grandfather and says, "Grandfather, which one wins?" The grandfather quietly replies, "the one you feed."

Each day we get to choose. Who or what will we serve? What false gods do we allow to become the center of our attention? What idols do we need to put away in order to turn our loyalty back to God? What false gods do we worship as a faith community? What false gods do we worship as individuals? Imagine for a minute if we were to put those things away and make serving God the priority in all we do. How might our lives be transformed? How might the transformation of our lives transform others?

In the verses just after our reading for this morning ends, after the people have enthusiastically proclaimed that they will serve the Lord, the scripture reads "Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord." This stone was to serve as a reminder of the promise. Not a reminder for God, but a reminder for the people.

We human beings are notorious for breaking our promises, even promises to God. But God is different. Whether or not we choose to serve God in every decision, every moment, big and small, as individuals or as a society. God always chooses us. God always chooses us. God is steadfast in her love for us. Full of grace and forgiveness. Full of compassion and love. And full of desire that we might be filled with the same good things. So much so that there is no room for anything else. May it be so. Amen.