

**To Serve and Protect**  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
November 6, 2011

**Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25**

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

<sup>14</sup> ‘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. <sup>15</sup> 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.’

<sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup> 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; <sup>18</sup> 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.’

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.’ <sup>21</sup> And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, we will serve the Lord!’ <sup>22</sup> 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.’ <sup>23</sup> He said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.’ <sup>24</sup> The people said to Joshua, ‘The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.’ <sup>25</sup> So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Joshua, the namesake of the book from which we’ve read today and last Sunday, was the son of Nun, who was an aide to Moses. When Moses died before reaching the Promised Land with the Israelites, whom he had freed from slavery in Egypt, God chose Joshua as the next leader of the Israelites, and the one who would take them to their final destination, the land west of the Jordan River, which we remember from the stories of Jesus’ baptism. Those meant to live west of the Jordan River are members of the twelve tribes of Israel. So, while we think of the Israelites as a whole people, within the people of Israel were groups, twelve of them, descended from another big name in biblical history - Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons and the tribes are descended, and thus named, for the sons of Jacob.

Prior to our reading today from the last chapter of the book of Joshua, and after our reading from last week where the people crossed the Jordan River while the priests held back the waters, Joshua led the

people in one of the deadliest narratives in the Bible. God has promised the Israelites this land but it is already occupied by the list of people we heard last week: the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites. With God's help, Joshua led the people to conquer and kill the armies of those cities. Once the lands were claimed by the Israelites, Joshua divvied them up among the tribes into eponymous lands. In our reading today the leaders of these tribes are gathered together in the city of Shechem, in the country of Ephraim.

Such a gathering, a gathering to renew a covenant, was not uncommon. Indeed, such gatherings exist today. You see, our modern worship is structured in much the same way as these gatherings. We read: "the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel...presented themselves before God." Today, we gathered and presented ourselves before God. We read: "And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.'" The Word of the Lord is proclaimed. We read: "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." As we close our worship, a charge will be given to go and live with your lives oriented toward God. We read: "we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." Together, we will share in the prayer of dedication, renewing our commitment to offer our lives for God's purposes.

*We* are also being called to Shechem today. We gather each week to renew our covenant with God for we are a slow people who forget easily the promises we made and sometimes our hearts aren't fully in our pledges. Praise God we have so many opportunities to renew our covenant as a community of faith and countless opportunities to renew our personal covenants with God, as many as there are minutes in a day. So let's make today really mean it, even if we only make it through the day. Before we gather at the Lord's table, as we will do soon, make peace with those with whom peace is needed. When we share in the prayer of dedication, claim that prayer as your own. When you hear the charge, receive it with hope and a promise to fulfill it.

It is easy to go through the motions - sometimes life intrudes on our thoughts and it's hard to focus, sometimes we've said the same things so many times, we don't even need to think about the words. For example, have you ever lost your place in The Lord's Prayer? Be honest - let me see a show of hands. *I* have! At least no one can really see when you do! Sometimes a thought will break in and derail my train of thought. And, I don't know about you, but I need to start all over from the beginning to get back on track, not something easy to do. The thing is, it is **good** that church is part of our routines and that the routines of the church are familiar. If you've ever been in an unfamiliar church or a church of another denomination, you miss those routines because they are part of who you are. But they are meant to be a conscious, active part of who you are, rather than unconscious.

Like the gathering at Shechem, these occasional times of calling together were, in part, to shake the Israelites out of complacency. They were to remind the people that God was still active in their lives. Of course, they were to praise God and give thanks for all God had done and to help the Israelites remember whose they were, but they were also to remind the Israelites not to get too comfortable. Our gatherings are the same. Let today shake you out of your own form of complacency. The history of the Israelites is not a collection of quaint, unrelatable stories. Even though they are no longer physically in our midst, their legacy, their individual and communal flawed humanity is just like our own. Just because it happened a long time ago in a place we've never been doesn't reduce its significance.

When Armistice Day was first proclaimed, the people of the United States were invited "to observe the day in schools and churches, or other suitable places, with appropriate ceremonies of friendly relations with all other peoples."<sup>1</sup> On Veterans' Day, as it is now known, it is important to remember that the service of our military men and women is not only in the history books - it sits among you in these pews. A fresh reading of the Bible will remind you of the very real trials and adversity, personal drama and perseverance of the people of Israel, these people who vowed to serve God; a fresh reading will remind you how similar we are in this human family, as children of God. A conversation with one of the veterans among us, in this church, in your family, in this community, will make alive the struggles, sorrows, and small victories of those who vowed to serve and protect the liberties and the people of this nation and of other nations. Neither the Israelites nor veterans nor our God are to be merely relegated to history - the Israelites are among you in these pews; the veterans are among you in these pews; most of all, God is among you in these pews.

As we worship today, it is good to say you will serve the Lord. But before you make that promise, remember not to do it casually for the Lord is a holy God, so holy that the descendants of the tribes of Israel, the Jewish community, will not say God's name outright. Such a holy God has expectations and hopes that are meant to be taken seriously, not lightly. Such a holy God deserves only our best selves and our best efforts. To such a holy God, let us all come to worship, let us all dedicate ourselves, let us all renew our covenants, both as a community and as individuals, let us all set aside the other gods of finance and appearances and technology. Choose this day whom you will serve for you are called, just as the very real Israelites, "to revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness."

Let us pray: Holy God, hear today our promise to serve you. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.va.gov/opa/vetsday/vetdayhistory.asp>