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Joshua 24:1-2, 14-15; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
Choices
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Choose this day whom you will serve. This verse from Joshua is the most famous part of the book of Joshua. The phrase that follows: “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” is a popular cross stitch pattern or wall hanging. But the book of Joshua is not very popular anymore because it tells the story of a crusade made in the name of God which leads to the genocide of an entire people. Very little in the book of Joshua is easy reading in fact – it is a story filled with bloodshed and war. But, in the last chapter, at the end of the battles, when all is won, Joshua gathers all the leaders of Israel around him and demands they make a choice. He acknowledges that people are worshipping the gods of their ancestors in Egypt, instead of the one God who has been faithful to them throughout their battle. So, he lays it all on the line...the people are welcome to make any choice they'd like, but if they want to stick with him, they will choose to worship the one holy God of Israel. Take it or leave it.

Choose this day whom you will serve. Jesus is at it again in the book of John with more talk of bread. If you've been in church the past few weeks you've heard the story of the miracle feeding of the 5000 and how when the crowd followed him, he talked a lot about bread and being the bread of life. In today's reading he told them: “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” And when they did not understand him, when they were quite offended by his talk of eating flesh and drinking blood, he didn't backtrack but instead put everything on the line. He told them if they didn't find his teaching acceptable, they could leave. Take him or leave him.

Both these scriptures hinge on making a choice about which God people are going to follow. It's a big choice and for the people in both crowds and a choice which will shape everything about the rest of their lives. And since Joshua and Jesus, churches have taken up this role of asking people to choose God.

But over the centuries churches have very often made the choice to follow Jesus either too easy or too hard. On the too easy side, many churches say that the only thing you need to be a Christian is to accept Jesus into your heart and to make a public proclamation. These churches say that is all you need to be "saved" by which they typically mean, to be able to go to heaven. But many people who do this – accept Jesus and make a public proclamation, find that things may not feel all that different afterwards. And with no expectation or guidance about how to live a Christian life, no community to study and worship with, no understanding about how the choice to be a Christian can and should impact your other choices, it is easy to fall away from the choice to follow Jesus altogether. Eventually it ends up being just as easy to leave, to walk away from Jesus, as it was to become a Christian.

Other churches have made it awfully hard to be a Christian. These churches often have a lot of doctrine and strict rules and expectations with very little or no room for questions or doubts. In these churches, people are often expected to believe all the same things and follow strict codes of behavior. These churches tend to exclude people because of who they are or what they doubt or because their behaviors don't fit their understanding of Christianity. And when there is such a narrow view of what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus, inevitably, lots of people are either left out or choose to leave when they just can't or don't want to fit into the parameters anymore. It's just too hard.

Both kinds of churches – where being a Christian is either very easy or very hard emphasize a specific kind of relationship with God. The “too easy” churches offer an option that is focused on heaven and eternal life, putting less emphasis on relationship with God and a community during this life. And the “too hard” churches make a relationship with God feel almost impossible to attain.

But, as one of my favorite pastors pointed out, “It is instructive to remember how little the Gospel story is about doctrine and religious experience and how much it is about making choices and then following. Jesus never once said believe ideas about me, nor—it is surprising to be reminded—never once did he say accept me in your heart as your personal Lord and Savior. What he did say—over and over—was “Come, follow, go into the world, feed my sheep, love your neighbor.”¹

Now at some point you made the choice to follow Jesus. The choice to be a part of this community of faith. And part of our faith is to revisit that choice now and again to ask ourselves: what impact does that choice have in our lives?

The choice to follow Jesus is a big one, but the choices we make after that choice are what continue to shape us into disciples. There is a famous saying that says Jesus has a lot of admirers but few followers. It is one thing to listen and hear the stories and agree with the general principle. It is far more challenging to make the choice to follow Jesus and then to live out your days choosing repeatedly to call yourself a Christian. Or said differently, perhaps it is easy to make that choice to follow Jesus each morning, but hard to follow through with that choice all day long.

¹ <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2000/082700.html>

Because following Jesus all day long, means Jesus is in all our choices. The big ones like: what kind of job we do; whether we get married and if so, to whom; whether we have children; where we live; what kind of volunteering we do, but it also means Jesus is in the very daily choices we make: what we choose to wear, eat, buy; how we spend our leisure time, who we vote for, the ways we spend our money; our daily interactions with strangers, colleagues, the person who checks us out at the grocery store, our friends, our family and our enemies. Following Jesus means bringing Jesus into all those choices, all those interactions. And that is a lot of choices to bring Jesus along for.

Which is why now might be a helpful time to mention that in the book of Joshua, Joshua says, “as for me and my household, we will follow the Lord” and then all the people agree to follow God as well, and then the people of Israel spend a lot of time failing at this promise. They still choose other Gods, they still sin, they still get caught up in terrible situations of their own making. They have great and faithful moments, but they also have the full range of the opposite.

This gets missed by churches who say being a Christian is just a onetime proclamation rather than a lifetime of trying to incorporate the teachings of Jesus guaranteed to be full of stumbles and challenges. And churches who set unreasonable expectations of what being a Christian looks like miss that even Jesus’ own closest disciples betrayed and abandoned him.

So, we can choose to serve the Lord, and we will have good and faithful times, but we should know by the witness of all who have gone before us that we will also fall short and fail sometimes too. And knowing that, if we still find ourselves wanting to try and follow Jesus, to try and bring Jesus into our daily choices and lives, then perhaps our reading from Ephesians can help.

Like the book of Joshua, this can be a difficult passage because of the war imagery. And we should be weary of religious symbolism wrapped up with images of fighting and soldiers and war. We've seen plenty of what happens when religion is co-opted by fundamentalists with weapons - enough to know it isn't ever good.

But Paul's use of armor is meant to remind us of what we need in our daily lives, in our daily choices, to be able to follow God. We need things like truth, righteousness, strength, peace, faith, the Word of God and prayer. Each of those is a sermon but being a follower of Jesus means examining all our choices by these attributes, rather than making choices based on what will make us popular or what we most fear or our own greed or selfishness or apathy. Following Jesus means regularly and intentionally examining our choices to see if they fit our faith, including revisiting choices we've made which have become habits and routines. And for this, the end of the Ephesians' reading is especially poignant. Paul says: "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication."

If there is anything that can help us to make the choice to be a Christian each day, every day, in good times and bad, when it is unpopular but right or when it means following a path less traveled, it is the practice of prayer. If there is anything we can hope will bind us in community, hold us together and uphold us in difficult times, it is prayer. Many of us feel like we don't have the right words to use to pray. It's simply not true. There are no right words to stand before God with – only openness, honesty, a willingness to listen and a desire to encounter the holy. Some of the best prayers are simply: "help," "please," "thank you."

To bring our choices before God; to subject all our choices to examination; to ask how our choices fit into who God calls us to be; to wake up each day and choose

to bring Jesus along with throughout the day – this is what it means to follow Jesus.

So, even though you made the choice already – long ago or recently - the question remains...who will you choose to follow? And who will you become as a product of the choices you make each day?

And as you consider it, remember what one preacher said about being a follower of Jesus that, when he said: “It is, in fact, a lifelong process, not an event. ‘When did you decide for Christ,’ I have been asked and perhaps you have too. And the answer is that long before you and I decided, God decided—to love us and care for us and to be our God forever. And that deciding to be God’s (person) is a process, choices made every day, in fact.”² So, be confident in God’s love and grace for you, and choose this day whom you will serve, and choose again and again, as God chooses us each day.

² <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2000/082700.html>