

Promises Renewed
Joshua 24:1-18,23-26
Matthew 4:8-10
Galatians 3:26-29

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Joshua 24:1-18,23-26

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. 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 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 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. “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.

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.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 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; 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.”

He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. 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.

Matthew 4:8-10

Again, the devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."'"

Galatians 3:26-29

in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

We've skipped over a number of chapters here in the story of God and God's people, but God, speaking through Joshua, conveniently provides a summary. As summaries always do, his summary leaves out a few details.

Moses, who led the Hebrew people out of Egypt and led them in the wilderness, never set foot in the Promised Land. He died in the wilderness just before they crossed the Jordan River into the land that God had promised Abraham. Joshua was Moses' successor. He led the Hebrew people in their conquest of the Promised Land.

Joshua lays out all that God has done for the Hebrew people.

When God told Abraham to leave his family and his home and to go where God told him, God made Abraham a threefold promise. God promised Abraham descendants, land, and a blessing. Joshua lays out how God has kept all three parts of that promise.

Abraham has twelve tribes of descendants. They have a land which God gave them. And they have received God's blessing. God has walked with them all the way. God has kept God's promise.

And the people still cart around their household idols, whether they're Chaldean deities or something the family picked up in Egypt. The people still occasionally worship the gods of the Amorites, the people whom they conquered.

So Joshua tells these people, "...choose this day whom you will serve, ... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

This is a famous Bible verse. It has been quoted in speeches and educational curricula, by Popes and preachers and politicians. You can find it printed on plaques and doormats and pillows and T-shirts and key rings and tote bags and banners and picture frames and enormous wall stickers. I have a large plaque with this verse on it hanging in my dining room. It was given to me by this congregation on the occasion of my ordination.

If you're going to pick a verse to receive this kind of star treatment, Joshua 24:15 is a good one. I treasure that plaque, and I try to look at it every day.

But there's a danger here that we need to watch out for.

The danger is thinking that we've made it.

The danger is thinking, "Well, I've made that choice. I'm sure glad that's over and we're done."

Unfortunately, that's not how it works.

Those other gods creep back into our lives every chance they get. Every time we turn on the television or the radio or read the newspaper. The gods of the Amorites in whose land we are living try to creep back into our hearts and into our lives.

Let's review a couple of them. I know you know what they are. They are those things that compete with God in telling you how to view this world and your neighbors.

We'll start with race.

God did not make people in neatly defined categories, with neatly defined skin colors and social roles according to those skin colors, or according to where our ancestors were born. God made a family. Individual members of that family have a range of skin colors.

Human beings created the concept of race. They defined race in order to put one race on top of the others, and so that people who were called nonwhite could be defined as slaves, or as second-class citizens at best.

Race is sneaky. It combines with our entirely proper instincts to look after our family, and it makes us forget that all God's children are our family.

Leaders and would-be leaders still use race to divide us and to try to control us. They tell us to beware of "The Blacks," or "The Mexicans" or "The Jews." A century ago they would have been telling us to beware "The Irish" or "The Italians." Anyone who talks about other human beings that way is someone to watch out for. They're trying to make you afraid of your neighbors, instead of loving them.

Truly, though, race does not define a person.

Race overlaps with gender.

I am male. I was born that way. Roughly fifty/fifty chance. It is not a status I achieved through strength of character or intrinsic virtue. But there are voices out there that say it makes me better than my sisters in Christ. I have news for those voices: I'm not. I'm not inherently worse, but I am not inherently better.

Being male has never stood in the way of my achieving anything I set my mind to, or my aspiring to any profession or vocation. But I don't know a female pastor who hasn't been told at some point that she shouldn't stand up here and use the gifts God gave her.

Funny, nobody's ever said that to me. Maybe I'm missing something, but I don't do ministry with my beard.

And I don't know a rape survivor or a survivor of harassment or stalking or other terrorism who has not been told that her judgment is suspect, that nobody will listen to her. Who has not been told that nobody will take her word over a man's. Who has not been told, explicitly or implicitly, that his future is more important than hers.

Truly, though, gender does not define a person.

Gender overlaps with sexuality.

I am a straight white male. I was born that way. I did not choose these characteristics. I have never been told that any of them made me untrustworthy, or unfit to testify in court or serve on a jury, or unfit for any profession or vocation. However, I don't know a single lesbian, gay man, or transgender person who has not been told that. They, too, were born that way. These characteristics are inborn, the way that God made them. They are not choices, good, bad, or otherwise.

But leaders and would-be leaders talk about "The Gays," trying to get you to fear people for how God made them. Just like they talk about "The Blacks," and "The Jews."

Truly, though, sexuality does not define a person.

Paul explained in his letter to the Church in Galatia that none of us is better than the other. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Those were the fundamental divisions in Greek-slash-Roman society at that time. In Christ, those divisions are broken down. They are not what makes a person worthy. They are not what is important about a person. What is important is that he or she or they are a child of God. And so are you.

In the rabbinical Jewish tradition, the exact moment when dark officially begins is important. That moment determines when the Sabbath begins, and work is not permitted, and when the Sabbath ends, and work is permitted again.

There is a story told of a rabbi in ancient times who gathered his students together at twilight one evening. He put this question to them: "How can you tell when the day has ended, and the night has begun?"

One student made a suggestion: "Could it be when you can see an animal and you can't tell whether it is a sheep or a goat?"

"No, that's not it," answered the rabbi.

Another student said: "Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and you can't tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?"

Again the rabbi answered: "No."

After a few more guesses the students said: "Well, how do you tell when day has ended?"

The rabbi answered: "It is when you look on the face of a man or woman and you cannot see your brother or sister. If you cannot do this, then, no matter what time it is, you are in darkness and it is nighttime."¹

My brothers and sisters, there are forces out there who want to slip into our minds and into our hearts and twist how we view the world. They want to warp how we view ourselves and how we view our brothers and sisters. They want us to view some people as less than we are. They want us to view some people as fundamentally different in the core of who they are, rather than as our brothers or sisters.

They want to warp how we view God, how we worship. They want us to worship a God who loves only some people. They want us to worship a God who created all human beings, but who made some people just better than others.

All too often, they succeed. That is part of being human in a broken world. Not one of us lives a perfectly warp-free life.

But there is good news.

The good news is that, in Christ, we can be forgiven.

The good news is that, every day, we get another chance to do better than the day before.

God has done great things for us, things beyond our ability to pay back. And every day we get another chance to "choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Thank God!

¹ I have seen this same story attributed to several different rabbis, so I'm not naming any one.

AMEN