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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
August 29, 2021
14th after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Ephesians 5:21-31; John 6:60-69

Hymns: 2; 399:1-5; 307; 48:3

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'Your fathers, *including* Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods. ...

¹⁴ "Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! ¹⁵ And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

¹⁶ So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for the LORD our God *is* He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He *is* our God." (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: There is a common plaque in Christian homes. --

The wall décor at Hobby Lobby almost certainly has a number of choices for you to select to place this passage from our text on the walls in your home, “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!*” (v.15) That was one of the key statements in Joshua’s farewell address to the Children of Israel. He had led them into the Promised Land and they had taken possession of the land. The different tribes and then families had received their allotted inheritance from the Lord. Joshua was an old man, and it was time for the Children of Israel to possess the land by working it and living in it. The question was: would they live in it to the praise and glory of the Lord, or would they simply go on about life and adopt the lifestyle of those who had lived in the land before they arrived?

Our text tells us how the people verbally responded with an absolute and almost fierce positive response, *verbally*. Much of the rest of Old Testament Bible History tells us of how they actually followed through, – miserably!

It is important for us in our spiritual lives to get this right. It is important for our eternal welfare that we understand the truth about the choice to serve the Lord. Confessional Lutheran Churches, which represent a tiny fraction of Christian churches, even in our community, are the only ones that maintain a true teaching of how this takes place. We must understand and take note of the words at the very beginning of Joshua’s address to the people of Israel.

THEME: The Lord Calls Us to Serve the Lord.

The Lord **calls** us to --

I. Serve Him in Sincerity and Truth.

Before the assembly of all the people of the Children of Israel Joshua spoke **the Word of the Lord!** *“Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to **all** the people, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods. ... ¹⁴Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!’ ”*

(Joshua 24:1-2, 13-14)

This is the Lord calling the people He had chosen to be His own special people, to be the people from whom the Seed of the Woman, the Seed of Abraham, the Savior of the world, would come into the world. The Lord is calling them to serve Him as their Lord and their God. The Lord reminds them that this is not where they were as a people. He called Abraham to come out from his people and to separate himself from these people who served other gods. God revealed Himself to Abraham in grace and Abraham along with his nephew Lot and their wives and their servants were drawn to the Lord to serve the one true God all their days.

It is a truth not readily accepted by the natural man that we are not able to come to God on our own, but that the Lord calls us, and works faith in our hearts. This is as true for us today, for each and every one of us today, as it was for Abraham, as it was for Joshua, as it was for the assembly of the Children of Israel who heard the word of God from Joshua on that day.

We need to recall the words of Jesus that reiterate this same truth of God’s grace toward us who believe. In our Gospel lesson this morning we heard Jesus’ words: *“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. ... And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”* (John 6:63, 65)

Again, later in His ministry, on the night Jesus was betrayed He reminded His disciples of this grace, saying to them (and so also to us), “*You did not **choose** Me, but I **chose** you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.*” (John 15:16)

This calling to faith and service in the Lord is a call to repentance. It is a call that includes a turning away from the sinful ways of the world, and from the gods of this world to serve the Lord. This is not to be a superficial service to the Lord, that we sort of go through the motions of saying that we are Christian. It is to be done in sincerity and in truth. The Children of Israel were surrounded by nations that had their own false gods. It was a popular idea and generally accepted as truth that different gods had their individual realms of influence, sort of dividing the world up into different regions controlled and governed by the gods of that part of the world.

The Children of Israel had lived for four hundred years in Egypt and had been exposed to the worship of Egypt’s many false gods and idols, as well as the deification of rulers. This was not without some erosion of true faith and religious worship among the Children of Israel.

Through Joshua the Lord called upon the people of Israel to put away these false gods and any heathen ideas that still clung to them. They were to repent and to serve the Lord. The Lord was calling them to repentance.

As for the temptation to adopt the gods of the Amorites whose land they had just conquered and possessed, they were to completely reject these false gods as the useless idols they were. The truth is found in the Word of God. They were to serve the Lord. This was not a choice they would make of their own will, but a calling to faith and service to the LORD, their Redeemer.

And so it remains to this day. We also are surrounded by many false gods. Yes, the worship of false gods is common even in America! There are those who openly serve the false gods of Buddhism, or the many gods of Hinduism. Many people in ignorance of what they are doing take up the Hindu or Buddhist meditation practices to achieve spiritual oneness with the divine

within. We also hear about the spirit gods of the indigenous peoples of our land, and how people try to blend the belief in the Great Spirit with the Christian faith. It cannot be done!

False gods include any religion that rejects the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any religion that dismisses the virgin birth of Jesus, or the vicarious atonement of His death on the cross, or the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead, or the true and eternal divine nature that was His since before the world began, all these religions serve false gods.

And we have so many more! We have the god of science and worship of man, and worship of pleasure and the worship of money. Remember, anything we fear or revere, or trust as we should trust God and His word, that is our false god. We are inundated with false gods, all or any of which our sinful flesh would prefer over the one true God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

The Lord calls us to “*come out from among them and be separate*” (2 Cor. 6:17) and to be “*His own special people, zealous for good works.*” (Titus 2:14) It is the Lord’s calling that does this, not our will. “*No one can say that **Jesus is Lord** except by the Holy Spirit.*” (1 Corinthians 12:3)

So where does the choosing come in? Doesn’t everyone remember that Joshua challenged the people: , “*choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve?*” (v.15) Yes, Joshua did indeed say those words, but lets read them in their context: “*And **if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD**, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*” (Joshua 24:15)

These words were spoken for any who might consider it evil to serve the Lord. If they thought it was evil to serve the Lord then they could choose from among the other gods, the false and useless gods. There was no listing of the one true God along side the gods that they might choose.

Thanks be to God that we have been called to faith in the one true God! Thanks be to God that the Holy Spirit directs us in the truth of God so that we know God and are enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit to serve Him in sincerity and in truth.

He calls us to

II. Serve Him because He Is the God our Salvation.

Joshua concluded his challenge as God's spokesman by declaring: "***As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!***" (v. 15) The assembled leaders of the people responded to this bold confession of faith, for that is exactly what Joshua's statement was, a confession of his faith and discipleship. "*So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. ¹⁸And the LORD drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God."*" (v.16-18)

Why would they serve the Lord? Because the Lord is the One that delivered them from bondage in Egypt. The Lord is the One who revealed Himself as their Deliverer with a mighty arm, and great power, both in the ten plagues, and then at the parting of the Red Sea, where the Lord delivered the people of Israel as they walked through the Sea on dry ground, and then destroyed their enemies by the waters coming down together again and drowning the armies of Egypt in judgment and justice. Only a very few of the oldest of them might have seen these wondrous works of God, works of salvation, but they had heard of them repeatedly from their parents and in their worship and observance of the Passover. They all witnessed how God delivered the mighty nations of the Promised Land into their hands and gave them this land for their inheritance.

It was the Word of the gospel that convinced them that the Lord, **He is God**. The Lord was their Redeemer, their God. It was faith in the power of God to save that led them to put their trust in Him,

even as the Holy Spirit called them to such faith. Yes, they would serve the Lord because He was their God!

It is the message of God's grace, the message of His great power to save that has been used by the Holy Spirit to bring us to God, and lead us to declare our faith in Him. We also join the voices of those of old, of Joshua and the people of Israel to declare, "**As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!**" Praise the Lord that we have been called to such faith in the Lord as our God. We know the Lord as our Redeemer, as our Deliverer from a dreadful bondage, an enslavement to sin. In our natural state we were able only to sin. We could not serve the Lord. But God had compassion on us and sent His Son into the flesh to destroy the devil and all his woks and set us free from sin. We know and believe this gospel because we have heard it time and again as it is read from the Holy Scriptures which tell us of our Savior and the greatness of God's love toward us and all the blessings the Lord has poured out on us. He has claimed us as His own people through faith in Jesus, and we are blessed to know that He is our God!

So how did all this work out for Israel in the years that followed? We know from the book of Judges that the people very quickly turned away from the way of the Lord and did what was right in their own eyes. They neglected the Word of the Lord, and soon they wandered on pathways unholy. Time and again they needed to be called back to repentance. It is as Jesus declared, "*The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*" (Matthew 26:41)

We also need to learn from that. We need to understand that due to the weakness of our sinful flesh we are prone to sin. We are prone to wander from the truth. We are inclined by the weakness of our flesh to sin against the Lord and fail to serve the Lord in sincerity and truth.

The Lord calls us to a **life** of repentance. Time and again we come before the Lord and confess our sins and seek His love and forgiveness. It is God who is faithful. Time and again He forgives us for Jesus' sake and grants us His peace. We need that word of the Gospel to nourish and strengthen our faith against the wiles of the devil and the allurements of the world that pull on our weak and sinful flesh. The Lord set aside the Sabbath that we might find

rest, not so much for the body, but more importantly for the soul. It is so vitally important that we gather together around the Word, that we serve the Lord in sincerity and truth, and receive from the Lord's hand the blessings that come to us from hearing the Word, being blessed together with our fellow believers.

The Covid pandemic has thrown too many off our practice of regular worship, or gathering together to hear and study God's Word, and praise the Lord. And yet it is through the hearing of the Word that the Spirit strengthens us against temptation and doubt that would attack our faith.

With the Spirit's blessing and power may we be drawn to serve the Lord with gladness. May we dedicate ourselves, body and life, to serve the Lord. May we boldly confess before all, **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!”** (v.15)

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)