

"As For Me and My House!"

Joshua 24:14-15; Matthew 25:1-13; Hebrews 9:24-28

Compromise? Or refuse to compromise? Remain faithful to what God has revealed to us and to what God has called us to stand for and do? Or Capitulate by compromise? Remain faithful to God? Or kneel at the feet of Baal? Be in a state of perpetual readiness? Or be slothful and then by consequence be too late?

Some time in the early '80's my brother Jonathan and I rented a farm not far from us as the husband and wife owners, a very dedicated Christian couple, had agreed to take the position of ranch manager and overseers of a Christian troubled youth boy's ranch in Montana. Their commitment was for a minimum of 3 years. As Jonathan and I approached the couple's home for an initial discussion regarding terms of our share-cropping arrangement I spotted a little plaque intentionally stationed at the front door's entrance. The little plaque's message was a concise distillation of this morning's OT lesson. It read, simply, "Choose you, this day, whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

I was delighted, spiritually moved, and encouraged as I read those words for they told me a couple of things. Due to the plaque's location and the content of the message, it was a testament to the faith of this earnest and dedicated couple who wanted every person who frequented their home to know of Jesus Christ; it told everyone of their abiding and unshakable faith in Jesus Christ. It also was a challenge for everyone who saw it to come to a moment of decision. I never went to their home thereafter without my eyes being drawn to that proud proclamation and testament to the Christian faith. I hope it is not straying too far from the point I'm trying to make here but Roy died a month or so ago from a cancer that was discovered too late to do anything about. When it was discovered, and the prognosis revealed to be what it was, Roy immediately knew two things. First, he knew his time of discipleship and faith journey in this life was coming soon to an unavoidable end. Second, he knew precisely and without any doubt where his eternal safety and security lay. Understanding that his life could possibly be prolonged perhaps for a brief time, but only at the great expense of quality of life, he decided to accept matters as they stood. It was a bitter blow in one sense to his family and to the church of which he was a long time member and staunch supporter in terms of leadership and financial and prayer support. Roy's utter and unshakeable confidence in Christ and a clear understanding of the truth of the human condition brought to mind verses 27-28 of our Epistle lesson. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people." (NIV)

There is an undeniable and unmistakable connection between our Epistle and our OT lesson. The human condition is such that we are totally and utterly lost without the mercy and grace of God, for every human being, both believer and non-believer, will face the judgment. But for the fact of God's grace granted through Jesus Christ, that would be a fact worse than death itself. But the love of Jesus is such that the worst of fates is turned on its head by the greatest

alternatives possible. The answer? Trust and obey. Obey and trust. Choose you this day, whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord Jesus.

This past Wednesday I posted a brief FB video urging folks to take time, to make time actually if need be, to read, study, and ponder Joshua chapter 23 as a prelude and preparation for today's message, for chapter 23 pertains directly to and should be inseverable from our lesson in Joshua 24. You may remember that Deuteronomy, as one way of looking at the final book of the Pentateuch, is a collection of Moses's 3 farewell sermons. It was common place, and seems to have been even expected in that era and culture, that the dying patriarch or matriarch of an Israelite family would offer what amounts to a dying person's final message and words of advice and encouragement to the family they love so dearly. Life now as then is at times cruel and uncertain, and all of us have our failures as well as our successes. The more cruel the blows of life, the more earnest and determined were the messages left for those who would remain to carry on the family and faith tradition. "Learn from me and my mistakes." was the underlying motivation. "Learn what not to do and be reminded what we were told **to** do by the LORD." Ironically, the Israelites had to learn this simple but difficult to grasp lesson over and over because, as they would learn over time, any successful period of fidelity to the LORD was only a short distance and time away from apostasy. This squarely and inescapably was one lesson from Moses's final words to the Israelites for whom he had interceded over and over. Moses's successor Joshua put that same truth claim, admonition, and encouragement before the people just as Moses had done. "Do not take for granted that past or recent success is a guarantor of what is to come. Do not sit back on your laurels thinking we ourselves cannot fall, for the temptations are never far away, for past or present success may ultimately lull us into complacency and then into ruin."

This past week I've seen a number of people refer to a well known quote of our modern era. In fact, there are a few variations of the original. "Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. Those who have known freedom and then lost it, have never known it again."

Another variation reads, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free." [Ronald Reagan]

Wednesday morning I perused a news article pondering the possibility of either political party winning the presidency. Below the article was a running thread of comments offered by the public. One fellow suggested that, regardless of which party won the election, it would, after the contest was decided, be best for all of us to put aside personal politics and rally together as one behind whomever had emerged the winner. It was for the sake of unity and what's best for all, according to the argument made. However, one intuitive individual offered

a well-worded, timely, apt, and determined rejection, if not rebuke, of the first fellow's view. The second fellow understood perfectly well that what the first fellow advocated was nothing less than capitulation and compromise. What the second fellow understands, but which the first fellow seems unable to grasp, is that in situations like this, "compromise" unavoidably requires going directly against what one stands for. Hopefully as an illustration that is not too simplistic but to simply make a point, our current situation is not a situation where 2 sides can find a budgetary compromise between, say, spending \$1,000 as advocated by one group) and the spending of \$500 as advocated by the other group. Compromises of this type are not a compromise of principle, per se, but only a compromise in terms of determinative value. What is at issue in terms of the article and our current political and cultural context is the advocacy of compromise whereby one group would unavoidably have to give in to and thus give up one's ideological position. As a single example, if the issue was abortion, to get to a compromise would require, in one case outcome, giving in to the proposition that all abortion is wrong. Should the other political outcome come to pass, compromise would require the one side to accept the premise that abortion is morally sound. They are mutually exclusive positions flowing from mutually exclusive theological/religious beliefs. The Lord God or the cultural gods of the day.

Joshua, in chapter 23, explicitly points out that the people of God cannot in any way, means, or fashion cave in and compromise with those who stand opposed to God theologically and ideologically. It is not accidental or incidental that I encouraged folks via FB live Wednesday to consider Joshua 23 as preparation for today's message to which we will turn shortly: "Choose you, this day, whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." The choosing called for in chapter 24 (and the ultimate message that there is one and only one appropriate choice) is grounded in the argument that prefaces it. The argument is given at the beginning as an encouragement but then becomes something of a warning by the end: "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them." Then comes the dire warning. "But if you turn away [from God] and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you." (Joshua 23:6-7, 12-13, NIV)

Earlier this week I saw a number of well-meaning Christians suggesting that the losing side of this election, regardless of which side loses, when the outcome is certain, should just accept the new circumstances and try and work together for the betterment and peace of all. Sadly, last evening I saw some of my family members (not around here) make the same plea. Most everybody I know are tired of the division and unbearably tense cultural atmosphere in which

we live. But one also has to ask whether it is tenable to remain true to the true Christian faith and yet simultaneously capitulate and compromise on the great issues that stand before us, regardless of which side wins the election. The ending of chapter 23 unquestionably puts for an answer to the question of "what will happen" if said capitulation or compromise comes to pass. In terms of Israel's particular context of that moment and time Joshua warned them, "If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and you go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you." (Joshua 23:16, NIV)

Again, I am not talking of circumstances that are properly a matter of financial degree, but in terms of ideological and theological opposites that are mutually exclusive. Well meaning folks obviously focus on the value of peace within the ranks, peace within our culture. But the question is begged, "Peace, but at what cost? At the expense of the Gospel, at the expense of one's committed discipleship?" Jesus knew precisely that there would be times like this. This is why Jesus astounded some of his followers, saying, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matt 10:34, NIV) And in Luke 14:26, Jesus likewise, astoundingly, says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple." (NIV) "Who is more important, or authoritative? Family, or Me?"

In alignment with one take away from last week's sermon, these two passage sit among the so-called difficult passages of Scripture, for, Jesus, in one view, is almost universally heralded as the kindly Man of God who stands calmly and unapologetically for peace, kindness, forbearance, and good will. Surely Jesus' words just quoted had to have shocked his disciples as it shocks many folks today. Peace, yes. But never at any cost. We have no Scriptural permission or warrant for compromising on critical principles and matters of the faith whether played out in our personal or public life, whether the personal or public realm.

In case it is not obvious, the reason I found it necessary to use chapter 23 as foundational for understanding what was behind the "choose you this day" passage is that it applies quite directly to us today. At the time of Joshua's death Israel was entering a new reality, a time and place that was not only new to them but carried with it a number of very real perils. Similar to our circumstances here today, the Israelites would be living in the midst of, that is, surrounded by and interspersed with what were considered non-believers, folks who did not, and by choice would not, know, follow, and worship the LORD. They worshiped a pantheon of 70 gods. Joshua was warning the Israelites of the dangers associated with living in the midst of folks whose lives were based on very different and indeed incompatible theologies and ideologies. Child sacrifice, worship rituals, and sexual immoralities of various sorts held a prominent place in the theology and practice of the peoples among whom Israel would indeed be living. Numerous texts in the OT tell us of their theology and ritual sacrifice, that

is, barbaric slaughter of babies and young children. Following our theme this morning, you can't forbid it on the one hand and support it on the other hand. It was the same way with a host of other religious and cultural practices.

As one commentator noted, the Israelites "will need to muster Joshua-like strong, unwavering devotion to stick with Yahweh. Like Joshua, on their own they must also 'be careful to obey' - to 'be constantly on their guard, be vigilant' - to do what Yahweh commands." Joshua was admonishing Israel to stay the course they've traveled up to now. Keep on the track clinging to God as God has instructed and called them and as Joshua has been leading them. It should be crystal clear by now that Joshua harbors some very real fear that they, without his leadership, might buckle and give in to apostasy. From our knowledge of their subsequent history, that fear was not unwarranted.

Many of us today here in America are still trying to make sense out of the current election mess that has engulfed us. I'm thinking that most folks anticipated a final conclusion by at least sometime Wednesday. Tuesday night was hoped for but wasn't too likely a prospect. Some folks anticipated a lengthy battle, for there were too many signs afoot that there would be some skullduggery involved. Indeed, increasingly there have been signs of voter fraud so strong so as to be more than simply credible. The evidence is almost overwhelming but the media and the left hide it and refuse it. Thus, the saga continues. So does the angst amid the wait.

What I will share in a moment I offer as my thoughts and my thoughts alone. They involve speculation on my part.

In alignment with many others, it has been my conviction for some time that America, as a whole, has clearly turned its back on the Christian faith and on the Judao-Christian ethics upon which not only our Constitution was crafted and grounded, but indeed upon which our resultant national and cultural way of life rests. The Bible is abundantly, and unapologetically, clear that any nation or people of God who turns its back on God will do so at their own peril. Prior to the specific day of this election, November 3rd, there seemed to be a significant return, at least in terms of part of our nation's citizenry, to deeper prayer and petition, seeking the Lord's help and favor. I, among others, can't help but wonder how serious, or long term, some of this movement has been or was meant to be. The human condition is such that in times of crisis people run back to God, crying and begging for help at the last moment in the midst of a tearful pledge to be more faithful in the future. That was the Israelites over and over. Can we say it is not the case with our nation? I wonder, and again this is my own speculation, I wonder whether, if an election conclusion had been arrived on, say, Tuesday night or sometime on Wednesday, might that conclusion not have served to provide some sort of moment of great relief and joy such that folks on the one side would think, "Pshew!!!! Wow, that was close but we prevailed! Thank you, Lord." But then these same folks would resort back to the former state of spiritual lethargy. *A quick resolution begetting a quick forgetting*, that's what I'm wondering about. I can't help but wonder if a lengthier grinding through the tangled mess of these thorny election issues aren't a means by which God is giving us more time, perhaps forcing us, to think more seriously and more long

term in terms of returning to a stronger and more faithful spiritual commitment and discipleship.

Jesus's parable of the ten bridesmaids is a serious call to think about the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. It is a serious call to think about spiritual and physiological lethargy that tempts us to turn aside from matters of grave importance, even those in the political realm. Scripture shows us over and over that there is no realm of human existence that God is not interested in or sovereign over. He does, however, allow a certain sense of free will by which we will be held accountable. Choose well and exercise it wisely we are cautioned.

"Choose you, this day, whom you will serve." Adapted further, "Do not listen to or follow the ways of the cultural gods that tempt you, even if they end up being in charge of your nation. They are not in charge of you. Do not do as the cultural gods of the land in which you live encourage, or even try and force you, to do. Do not capitulate, accommodate, or negotiate. Do not compromise. Indeed, choose you, this day, whom you will serve and obey. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

In case it is not clear enough, the moment of decision was at hand for God's people. It was either devotion exclusively to God, or the beginning of what would be cultural accommodation, compromise, and eventual capitulation. As we know all too well, our nation stands at this moment in time at a crossroads, and Christians are facing the question of whether or not we will negotiate on the ethics and morality God has instructed us in via Scripture and told us to live into our society, even in the realm of politics. At a certain point in our Gospel lesson the door was shut and no more admission was granted. "Sir! Sir!" they cried out. "Open the door for us!" "I tell you the truth," was the reply, "I don't know you." We, today, can't agree to accommodation, negotiation, and compromise in the near term and then down the road realize it was a mistake. To try and reverse course then will be too little too late. Be encouraged, dear friends, and hold firm. Amen.