

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Brett Gibson

Choose

Joshua 24

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There is a need to choose whom we will serve. Because we will serve. Bob Dylan said it, so it must be right: “you gotta serve somebody.” It’s in our nature as humans to serve. We serve ourselves; we serve our children; we serve our customers; we serve our country; we serve.

It’s nice when you are preparing a sermon, to look, as much as you are able, at original languages. There’s almost always something enlightening there. The Hebrew word that occurs over and over again in Joshua 24 “to serve” is the Hebrew word, *abad*. It first occurs in Genesis 2. There, God has made a man out of the dirt, put his mouth on him, and breathed into him his Spirit to give him life. He then put him into the garden of Eden “to till it and to keep it.” That first verb: to till the land, is the same word *abad*.

We all serve. It’s the original verb, given to the first man. It is who we are. So, the question is not will we serve. Instead, we have apparently a very important question: whom will you serve?

And here at the culmination of the book of Joshua, now that the people of Israel have entered their long-promised land, and that land has been divided up among the various tribes, here at the end of their centuries-long struggle, a struggle marked by over ten generations of slavery and two generations of desert-wandering and military campaigns. Here at the end of the struggle and at the beginning of being a people with land and a future, their leader Joshua gathers all the people together at the great ancient city of Shechem and tells them: This is the time: your future begins now. So, choose this day whom you will serve: the gods of your ancestors or Yahweh, the God who brought you out of Egypt.

He beseeches them: put away the gods that your ancestors served...What does it mean to leave behind the ancestral gods? Because we have ancestral gods, too. Ours, perhaps, aren’t made of stone or given a proper name like Baal or Molech, but make no mistake: we have them. Those ancestral gods--you know, those gods on the other side of the river, where we remember when life was better--the ancestral gods protected the land, guaranteed security and promised abundance.

We must choose.

We must see it for the choice it is. We will serve, so whom will we serve? Because we don’t automatically serve the Lord, not without a great amount of time and years of practice. We probably have a small handful in this room for whom serving the Lord has become second nature. But I’ll admit: I’m not there.

I have a choice that I can make today, you have a choice that you can make this day, to serve the Lord, to set your intention...because it won’t happen automatically. Just because you asked Jesus into your heart when you were eight years old does not mean that you are serving him today. That doesn’t just happen. My natural inclination is still to serve myself, certainly, but to

serve other ancestral gods, for us, the gods that have been baked into the American project--the commitment to individualism, to nationalism, to prosperity, to what Walter Brueggemann has called "therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism." These are just some of our ancestral gods.

Lesslie Newbigin was a mid-20th century missionary from England to India. He served as a missionary in a couple of cities in India for almost 40 years. He then retired in 1974, and returned to his native England. He then famously (to some of us) began to ask what a missionary engagement with Western culture might look like. Within the study of missions, much work is done in the study of local cultures. One of the tragedies 19th-20th century cross-cultural missionaries identified is called *syncretism*: when elements of the Gospel are co-opted and just added on to previous religious systems without a real change of allegiance. The African tribe who learns from the missionary and puts Jesus on the shelf next to the other tribal ancestors and deities that they pray to.

Newbigin himself wrote of his time in India: "...[A] portrait of Jesus can be happily accommodated in the premises of a Hindu missionary establishment, because Jesus has been painlessly incorporated into the Hindu worldview. The foreign missionary knows that this is not the conversion of India but the co-option of Jesus, the domestication of the Gospel into the Hindu worldview. [The missionary] only slowly begins to realize that the same thing has happened in the West. Jesus is understood in the light of the assumptions which control our culture."

It's surprisingly difficult to identify syncretism in one's own culture, to untangle our commitment to Christ from these other ancestral gods. The first step is just realizing our allegiances may actually be divided. That the God we purport to serve has actually been lost in the morass of other priorities that govern our society and our individual lives. The first step in choosing whom you will serve is just realizing you have to choose.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has his Tonto Principle of Christian ethics. The Lone Ranger and Tonto were riding on the prairie when they very suddenly found themselves surrounded by 20,000 Native American Sioux. The Lone Ranger turned to Tonto and said, "What do you think we should do?" And Tonto replied, "What do you mean 'we,' White Man?"

It very much matters who "we" are. Those of us who have joined Joshua in choosing to serve the Lord and not the ancestral gods of our land have a different calling in the world. This word from Joshua to the people of Israel comes as they inaugurate their time in this Promised Land. This is his line in the sand, Col. Travis at the Alamo moment: "Choose this day whom you will serve."

I'll call this our baptismal choice. What is the intention of your life? Whom will you serve? If you will serve the Lord, this is the path you will take. But it's not enough just to declare our choice to serve the Lord. The covenant God has set up between himself and his people impinges on every dimension of public life. With Yahweh, it is, and always was, all or nothing.

This God whom they are choosing to serve is steadfastly "committed to neighborly justice and the organization of the economy for the sake of the weak and the vulnerable." (Brueggemann,

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/joshua-2413a-1425_b_1070263) These things fly in the face of our ancestral gods.

When prompted for a decision, the people eagerly join Joshua in their dedication to Yahweh. They cross-stitched for their house “We will serve the Lord” and put it on their walls, just like you did. Joshua’s first response to them is, “No. You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God,” but they insist. We see how that goes for the people of Israel. That intention is important for the people of Israel. Declaring it is an important step, but we quickly find that talk can be cheap; obedience is costly.

The next chapter in the Bible continues the narrative in the book of Judges. Judges, which is an account of these same people continually turning against the ways of Yahweh. Manifestly *not* choosing to serve the Lord. Perhaps back at Shechem with Joshua, they had the fortitude to choose to serve the Lord, but the scriptural history of the ancient Israelites is of a people who lose their way again and again. Do you ever feel that way? That the things I want to do, I don’t do; the very things I don’t want to do, I keep doing.

But our Gospel reading today reminds us this sort of choice isn’t just a one-time decision we make. Let’s call this our “eucharistic choice.” We come to the Gospel, we come to Jesus. And we realize need something more than a decision. We need a meal. In the practice of our church and the church around the world, we have these two preeminent practices, what we might call sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist. In Baptism, we make a choice, we set an intention, we declare our allegiance. In the Eucharist, we receive what we need to live out that choice. We come to the Table, not just to remember what Jesus did, but—as he says in our Gospel today—to eat his flesh and drink his blood and so to abide in him. We return to this Table every week—so regularly—to receive what we need, to participate in the sufferings of Christ, to rededicate ourselves to the baptismal choice we have made.

So, we have a choice to make—each of us. And we choose it again today: we eat his flesh and drink his blood and so abide in him. And it fuels us, it re-orient us. We remember we belong to the fellowship of the crucified, and we make the choice again tomorrow.

This path that often runs counter to the currents at play in our wider society. This path that refuses to pigeon-hole us on one side of the current political spectrum. This path that means a sort of daily death to our ancestral gods and commitment to the ways of Christ.

The response to Jesus’s words doesn’t have nearly the same resoundingly positive response as Joshua’s words did. This teaching is hard. “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” The call is not to our ancestral gods. The way is not about comfort or prosperity. The way is not easy; but it is the way we have chosen. It is the way of life.

1569 was a tough year to be an Anabaptist. It had been just over 50 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, launching what became known as the Protestant Reformation.

In those years, there were members of the Reformation emboldened by what Luther and Calvin and others had started, but felt like they didn’t go far enough. These Christians called

themselves Anabaptists and emphasized radical discipleship, resolute nonviolence, enemy-love, and—apparently most offensive to everyone—believer's baptism: being baptized as an adult who knows the decision they're making. At the time, Catholics hated the Protestants, and Protestants hated the Catholics. But everybody hated the Anabaptists.

By 1569, Anabaptists were being rounded up, tortured, and executed en masse. That year, one of the Anabaptists who had been imprisoned was named Dirk Willems, a Dutchman. Willems was held and tortured, implored to disavow his adult baptism or else face death. After weeks of torture one cold winter night, Willems escaped from a high prison window. A guard saw him escape and began to chase him. They reached a frozen pond, and Willems began to run across it. The guard who was chasing him followed, but didn't realize that Willems was able to cross it because he was so small and emaciated from the weeks of torture and malnutrition. The guard fell through the ice and screamed for help. Willems immediately turned back and saved his pursuer. Because he did this, he was caught, tortured further, and finally burned at the stake.

Choosing to serve the Lord is choosing to put aside your ancestral gods. It often looks a bit strange. It doesn't usually make the most financial sense. It doesn't seek self-preservation. Those are the ways of the ancestral gods. Dirk Willems served the Lord. As we prepare to come to the Table, to renew our Baptismal choice, to take up our Eucharistic choice, let us take some time, take some space to consider this choice.

Choose this day whom you will serve.