

"On Commitment"

Pastor Rich Knight

Trinitarian Congregational Church

Jan. 6, 2013

Joshua 24:1-8, 14-15

Context of Joshua 24

Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt-Exodus, Red Sea, Mnt. Sinai, etc. Next, he leads them through the wilderness for 40 years. He gets them to the edge of the Promised Land. He even climbs a mountain and looks out on the Promised Land. And then he dies. There's probably a message there about always falling short of Camelot this side of heaven. But nevertheless, Joshua takes over for Moses. Big shoes to fill indeed. It seems that he did ok. He led the Israelites into the Promised Land to settle & thrive there.

Chapter 24 is the last chapter in the book of Joshua. Now Joshua is about to die. So before he does he reviews with the people their sacred history with God. I wrote something for the Christian Literacy Project about the word, *Heilsgeschichte*, which means "*salvation history*." That's what Joshua is all about here with the Israelites. Of course, his goal is not just that they know their history. He's interested in much more than that. Let's take a look.

Joshua 24:1-8, 14-15

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.

"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."

Happy New Year. Happy NEW Year. It's a brand new year. Ophra Winfrey said, "*The new year is another chance to try and get it right.*" I like the image of a new year like fresh-fallen snow. It's pristine, inviting and spread out before us. No one has walked in 2013. No one has messed it up yet. The trail hasn't been walked on yet. And it's up to us to blaze that trail. We get a fresh start.

That's what Joshua is telling the Israelites. He reviews with them the trail they've been on. *How can you know where you're going if you don't know where you've been.* He knows he will not be with them much longer. They're about to begin a new chapter, literally a new book of the Bible. So Joshua not only retells the journey they've been on, he also calls them to renew their commitment to God, to the God who brought them this far.

"Choose this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. Serve the Lord with sincerity and faithfulness. Serve the Lord from your heart and with consistency - with steadfast faithfulness."

At the start of a new chapter in their sacred history, a new stage of their journey - laid out before like a snow-covered trail that hasn't been walked on yet - Joshua calls them to renew their relationship with God. He calls them to commitment. *"Choose this day whom you will serve."*

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher & theologian tells the story of a small town that had a wonderful Fire Chief. He was a gentleman among gentlemen. "Children loved to visit the firehouse. He always tipped his hat to the women and he could always be counted on for good conversation with the men about town. But one day there was a fire! The chief rounded up his men and rushed to the burning building. Much to his surprise, the fire chief couldn't get to the building because between him and the building were several hundred townspeople. Each of them was holding a water pistol. And there they were squirting their water pistols at the fire. *"Squirt! Squirt! . . . Squirt! Squirt!"*

The Fire Chief yells, *"What are you doing? Why do you have water pistols? What are you trying to do here?"* A spokesman for the group answers, *"We've gathered here to support your efforts, Chief. We all believe in the good work you're doing in this community, and we're here to do our part. We wish it could be more, but what we have to offer, we give freely."* *"Squirt! Squirt! . . . Squirt! Squirt!"*

The Fire Chief then explodes, *"Get out of the way! A fire is a place where people risk their lives to put out the fire. It's not a place to just do your little part. It's a place to put your life on the line. You've got to give your all if you're going to put out the fire!"*

Being a Christian is more than just *"squirt, squirt."* It's more than just having a little religion. It's more than giving a nod to God once in a while. It's more than believing that God is good and Jesus is wonderful. It's choosing to serve God every day. It's choosing to walk with God

every day. It's choosing to honor God in any and all circumstances. It's choosing to love God and love others in his name, every day. It's choosing to be a difference-maker, a justice-maker, a peace-maker. As Micah said, it's choosing *to "Love kindness, to do justice and to walk humbly with God."*

So, with all due respect . . . how is your commitment to God? How is my commitment to God? Is God at the center of our lives, or have we compartmentalized God and God is only one small part of our lives? Is God at the center or on the periphery? Is our commitment to God casual or are we serious dating? Are we in a covenant, a loving partnership to do life together, or do we just hang out together once in a while? Are we "Squirt, Squirt," or have we committed our whole lives to God? Choose this day.

This is why I like the concept of discipleship so much. Being a disciple is about following Christ in our every day lives. It's not just about believing the right stuff (*ortho-doxo*), It's about doing the right stuff (*ortho-praxis*). Right living. Right conduct. Right kindness Right impact. I like the concept of discipleship far better than "being saved." I grew up in an area with a lot of churches that stressed being saved. "Are you saved? How do you know? When did you get saved?" Best answer - when Jesus died on the cross & rose again! But the problem is this - getting saved is a once and done thing.

"I was saved when I was in the 7th grade. I gave my life to God."

"What have you done since?"

"Not much really. But I'm saved."

Discipleship is about being a follow, a learner, an apprentice of Jesus. It's about choosing every day to follow him.

I'd like to close by giving you several different ways to think about and articulate your commitment to God.

A. I think the word Commitment itself is a good one.

You can put some teeth into it, strengthen the commitment by naming some

specific things.

- I will strengthen my commitment to God this year by reading through the entire New Testament, or the Gospels, or reading 1 Gospel between now & Easter.
 - I will commit to being in worship every Sunday humanly possible.
 - I will commit to praying every day, multiple times a day.
 - I will find a new way to help others this year - whether it be financially or hands on.
 - I will take a risk for God, move out of my comfort zone.
- All these are ways to recommit to God.

B. The Mystical view - I will seek to unite my life to God each and every day. I will seek to unite my spirit with the Spirit of the Living God. Through prayer, meditation and holy living I will seek to live in union with God. Jesus said, "Abide in me and I in you." I will seek to abide in Christ each and every day this year.

C. The Methodist View - Sanctification (John Wesley)

Sanctification means to become more holy. I will seek to become more holy this year, more like God - in my thinking, in my speech, in my actions, in my attitude. I will seek sanctification.

D. Living as a Child of God.

It's living out your identity in Christ. "Who are my sisters & brothers, but they that do the will of my Father in heaven?" I will seek to live as a child of God. I will claim that identity and seek to live it out.

E. The Way of Discipleship is the one I've already mentioned.

I will seek to live as a Christ-follower, an apprentice of Jesus. I will be a learner and a follower and an active member of a group of Christ-followers.

F. Lutherans describe it as Growing in Faith.

My relationship with God is based on faith. We're saved by faith and we're to walk by faith. I will seek to have more faith this year, more trust in God, more reliance on God, more faithfulness to God this year.

G. Another Evangelical way of describing it is becoming More Christ-like.

I will strive to become more like Jesus this year. Martin Luther said we are to be "Little Christ's" to one another. That's a high calling, but in deep humility I will try - to live like Jesus, to love like Jesus, to serve like Jesus.

Let me review these phrases and concepts with you before I stop. I suggest picking one to articulate what's in your heart.

- Renewing your commitment to God, making specific commitments
- Uniting your life to God, living in union with God
- Sanctification - becoming more holy
- Becoming more like Christ every day
- Discipleship - living as a Christ-follower
- Growing in faith and faithfulness
- Seeking to live as a Child of God.

Since we're here in North Andover, let's give the last word to Philips Brooks, the great 19th C. Episcopal priest and resident of North Andover. Brooks foreshadowed the Evangelical idea of inviting Christ into your heart. (from "O Little Town of Bethlehem")

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giving.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear him calling, but in this world of sin.
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The Dear Christ enters in.
O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray
Case out our sin, and enter in.
Be born in us today.*

Old Joshua would only add, "Be born in us every day."

"Choose this day."

Amen.