

“CHOICES: I - WHOM WILL YOU SERVE?”

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Joshua 24:1-15

Mark 8:27-35

Think back to when you were a child, and listen to what I'm about to say, and tell me if it rings a bell. One potato, two potato, three potato, four; five potato, six potato, seven potato, or. Or “eenie, meenie, miney, mo, catch a tiger by his toe, if he hollers let him go, eenie, meenie, miney, mo. My mother told me to pick the very best one, and you are not it!” I can see by your smiles that some of you remember doing those little rhymes when you were trying to make choices as a child.

Probably not how you make choices these days, huh? Well, however you make them, you know that life is filled with choices to be made. Heck, you made a slew of choices already this morning - when to get up, what to have for breakfast, what to wear, if you were going to come to church, and then, which service would you come to. You picked what car to drive (assuming you have more than one), and what route to take. You had to pick a parking spot, and then in here, you had to pick a pew (unless, of course, you have “your pew” that you sit in every week).

Well, you get the idea. Life is filled with choices - lots of them. Some of them are little ones, like the ones I just mentioned, but some of them are big ones, and some really big ones. In about a month, all of us are going to make some big choices in the upcoming election - both locally and nationally.

And actually, the election season is what started me thinking about doing this sermon series on “choices” for the next few weeks. Today, it's “whom will you serve?” and later on we'll deal with “how will you serve,” “what will you give,” and “how will you live?”

So we begin with “whom will you serve?” which actually is about the biggest decision, the biggest choice any of us is called to make in life - and that is the choice for Jesus Christ. It is the decision to say yes to Jesus, and ask Him to be the Lord of our lives.

Both of our scripture lessons this morning are about choosing the Lord, over the other gods (small g) in our lives. The lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, from the Book of Joshua, is about the day Joshua confronted the people of Israel, and told them they had to decide who they would follow.

And the lesson from Mark is a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, where Jesus makes them choose as well. He asks them, “who do people say that I am?” and they answer him.

But then Jesus goes a step further, “okay, that’s all well and good, but who do **you** say that I am?” Have you made a decision? Have you made a decision for yourselves?

That passage from Mark always reminds me of the story of the little boy who was asked by someone if he was a Christian. “Sure I am,” he replied. “Well, why are you a Christian?” the person then asked him. “Oh, I don’t know, I guess it just runs in my family!”

That’s cute, but what’s not so cute, is that a lot of people hold on to faith like that. They’re lukewarm about it. They grew up in the faith with their family, they may have a really devout mother or father, but they’ve never made the decision for Christ for themselves. They will actually say, “Oh well, I’m getting into heaven on their coattails!”

Not. To that, Jesus would say, “But who do you say that I am?” And Joshua would challenge with, “Choose this day whom you will serve.”

No one can make the decision for Christ for you. It is your’s alone to make.

It’s interesting to see how Joshua and Jesus brought their respective parties to the point of making a decision. In the case of Joshua, he confronted the people of Israel with facts - the facts of all that God had done for them. I hope you listened carefully to it when Joe read the lesson - because it was a dramatic sweep of the history of God with His people.

Joshua said -

God was with you before Abraham, and then He brought forth Abraham, and blessed him with his son Isaac, and then He blessed Isaac with Jacob and Esau, and He gave them land to possess. And then He gave Moses and Aaron, and sent plagues on Egypt when they threatened you. Then He brought you out of the land of Egypt and opened the Red Sea to swallow your enemies. He lead you through your wilderness wanderings, helped you fight your enemies again and again, and gave you your own land.

Like we are wont to do, the people of Israel were taking all of that for granted, and succumbing to the wiles and pleasures of the gods of that day and time. So Joshua put it to them straight - “Choose this day whom you will serve - those gods or God the Father Almighty.” And he left no doubt as to his own

decision - "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Jesus' conversation with the disciples took a little different tack. It sounds like, at the beginning, Jesus was just trying to get some information from his disciples about what people were saying about him, what the public perception was. "Who are people saying that I am? Like, do they get me? Do they understand who I am, and what I came to do?" - which is a pretty non-threatening question to ask. So they tell him what was going through the grapevine, what was the talk on the streets. "Jesus, they say John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets." They're basically telling Jesus what they've heard. Easy enough.

But then there's a follow-up question: "who do **you** say that I am?" No more facts about them out there - who do **you** say that I am? Have you made a choice? Have you made a decision?

And it was Peter who answered him, "You are the Christ." In that moment, he made a public decision, a public choice for Jesus.

Whichever way it happens, the fact is clear - each person must decide for himself or herself about who Jesus is in their life, and each person must make a choice to ask Him to be the Lord of their life. No one else can do it for them.

I read this week about an evangelist who was speaking in front of a group of college students. He picked a young, innocent-looking woman out of the crowd, and asked her to stand. Then he asked her, "Do you believe in marriage?"

She said, "Sure I do." "Why?" he replied.

She talked about a deep bond between two people, and that marriage was a good context for raising children, and that in marriage you would never be lonely.

When she stopped talking, the evangelist said, "You're married!"

"Oh no, I'm not!" she said back to him.

Then he said, "Well, if you really believe in marriage, it could be said that you are married."

"What?" she replied. "I haven't met a man yet, and I haven't made the commitment."

"Exactly!" he shouted. "It's not enough to believe! You have to make a commitment, and there has to be somebody to whom you make that commitment."

Tony Campolo, who told this story, says, “So it is with being a Christian. Affirming the truths of the Christian faith is not enough. A commitment must be made.” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 79)

Joshua said to the Israelites, “You can’t have it both ways - you can’t worship the gods of this world, and God Almighty at the same time - you have to make a choice - you have to commit.”

Luciano Pavorotti often talked about how, when he was young, he wasn’t sure what he wanted to be when he grew up. He, of course, was a good singer, but he was taking courses at college to be a teacher. When he graduated, he asked his father, “Shall I be a teacher or a singer?” And do you know what his father said? “Luciano, if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.”

Pavorotti said, “I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it’s laying bricks, writing a book - whatever we choose - we should give ourselves to it. Commitment, that’s the key. Choose one chair.” (On-line, bible.org)

Choose one chair. For Christians, when it comes to faith, the choice is clear. It is Jesus, and Him alone. It is a serious choice. It is a life-altering choice. And it is not a light, carefree choice, because with it comes responsibility, and service, and a call to look beyond ourselves to the other. It means turning away from the gods of our world - money, achievement, possessions, ego - as the primary purpose of our lives - and turning to Jesus, and following in His way above all else.

It is, indeed, a serious, life-altering choice. But oh, it is a wonderful, joyous choice as well. A choice for Jesus, a choice to ask Him to be the Lord of your life, is a choice for eternal life - not just in the future, but right now. A life of meaning, of purpose, of service, and yes, sacrifice. A life for others, and a life which will put within you the peace that passes understanding and a joy unspeakable at times.

It is a life lived knowing that you are never, ever alone - that God in Christ is with you always - that no matter what happens, He is there. No matter what you do, how far away you might turn, He will always search for you, and offer His amazing grace and forgiveness when you confess.

It is a life lived in the arms of the Lord, who, long before you chose Him, chose you - and gave His all for you.

So the time has come. Like Joshua, like Jesus, I ask you today: Have you made the choice? Have you decided for Jesus? Have you asked Him into your heart, asked Him to lead you in life? And if you haven’t, what are you waiting for?

He stands at the door knocking, waiting for you to let Him in.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Will you join me now in a time of contemplation and prayer? With your head bowed and eyes closed, I invite you to look back on your life as Joshua invited the Israelites to do. Look back on your life, and think of all the things God has done for you. List them in your mind and in your heart . . .

Now think for a few moments about the gods (small g) in this world and in your life - the gods that try to pull you away from the Lord. . . career, money, possessions, ego - whatever they may be . . .

Now, as you pray in silence, make a choice - choose whom you want to serve, choose whom you want to follow - and if you've already made the choice, reaffirm your commitment to Christ.

I invite you to repeat these words silently after me::

Lord Jesus, I choose you today. You are the Christ, you are the Son of the Living God. You have done so much for me, and too often, I have taken it all for granted, and turned to the ways of the world for meaning in my life. Jesus, I choose you. I give you my heart. Take my life, and let it be consecrated Lord to thee.

Today, and for all the days ahead Jesus, I choose you.”

Amen.