

## If You Had to Choose, Right Now....

[Texts - Joshua 24]

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One of the many benefits I get from teaching Confirmation Classes, is that our young teens help me understand how archaic and backward our religious language and identity can look when seen through the eyes of the upcoming generations. The fact that we call our 2,000 years old Scriptures the “New” Testament is one simple example. The fact that many young American’s early impression of Christianity comes from a picture of an old preacher holding a “God Hates Fags” sign at military funerals is another. YouTube clips from Cincinnati’s Creation Museum, broadcasting the “Biblical Proof” that the world was created exactly 6,018 years ago - complete with video of Adam and Eve playing with a young Tyrannosaurus Rex - also prove detriment to our overall credibility. No wonder it’s a challenge to convince a modern generation that, while our Faith may be extremely old, the truths and values that it can reveal are amazingly timeless and exceptionally precious.

Having said this, it may seem a bit odd that I’ve selected a reading from our “Old” Testament, for this morning’s message. [What can I say? I do like a challenge!] And I’m intrigued by the challenge that Joshua presents in that reading: “Choose today whom you will serve: the old, yet familiar gods of your ancestors; or the new and fashionable gods of the Amorites, in whose land you now dwell; or you can choose the One True God!” Even though that challenge was issued some 3200 years ago to the people of Israel, the *choices* that Joshua puts forward represent the kind of choices that people of every nation and generation also face. For example, you and I can choose to follow a god of the past - a dreadful god of judgment and wrath; a warrior god, who helps one group of people vanquish another. Or, we can follow the fashionable and popular gods of the land in which we now dwell - the idols of materialism and self-interest - gods whose primary function is to insure our personal comfort and security. Or,

[behind door number three] we can choose to serve One True God - the Creative Source of the Cosmos; the Divine Spirit of Life and Love.

This morning, I'd like us to consider the choices we face, in deciding where our trust and dedication will ultimately lie. Like those ancient Israelites, you and I are people on a journey. Some of us come from faith traditions that proclaim a god of judgement - one who rejects individuals or entire cultures that don't fit a particular social or religious mold. Others of us may have backgrounds that are less religiously oriented, and more focused on pragmatic issues - like achieving a high level of success or status for ourselves. Yet here we all are, gathered in a community of faith whose stated mission is "To Love, Serve, and Accept All People, with God's Life-Changing Power!" And while we may not be fully aware of it, our being in this particular place, at this particular moment, is the result of a series of earlier "choices" that you and I have made. The truth is, our entire lives consist of a series of *choices!* Therefore, it seems to me that Joshua's ancient words remain deeply relevant, right now. And so I challenge you: "Choose *today* whom you will serve!"

Now before any of you get nervous that I'm leading up to some kind of old-fashioned "Come to Jesus" alter-call invitation, let me assure you that's not my goal...at least, not completely. I do believe, that there are pivotal moments in our lives when you and I are called to make significant choices and life-changing decisions. Yet I also recognize that attempts to manufacture or manipulate those kind of soul-searching decisions often lead to hollow and short-lived results. I think even old Joshua himself understood how this can happen.

Joshua says to the people of Israel, "Choose *today* whom you will serve." And the people of Israel choose - *that day* - to serve the One True God. Joshua says, "That's wonderful! However...considering your track record, there's a good chance that you will change your minds and have a religious relapse." That was the problem with those Israelites: one day they could be totally dedicated to serving the One True God, but the next day - when problems, or pleasures, or prosperity changed their perspective - they'd run back to their old

idols, or even build a new golden calf to idolize. The entire history of the people of Israel contains a series of ups and downs on their journey of faith. For a time, they would follow the Holy One wholeheartedly, and then they'd turn away; only to return another day, to eagerly serve their God. It seems that God picked a rather fickle group of people to be the "Chosen Ones"! But then again, who else *could* God pick, except inconsistent and unpredictable people? People like them; people like *us!*

In spite of the Israelites' [or our] best intentions, people's trust in the power of Divine compassion and security can quickly fade-away, when fearful circumstances - or even success and prosperity - grab their attention and concern. *Fear* is an intensely powerful force, that can pull us away from trusting in our unseen, Sacred Source of Life. Our fears tell us, that Divine Compassion isn't expansive enough to take care of us all; therefore, we'd better take care of ourselves! So we shun, or even vilify those who we perceive as being against us, or different from us. And we create a god in our own image - One who just happens to despise and reject the exact same people we do! Or we deal with our fears by creating the *illusion* of safety and security - through the accumulation of wealth or power. From the Golden Calf of the ancient Israelites, to the Golden Parachute of the modern-day CEO, concentrated wealth has served as an enticing alternative to actually trusting in God. Stockpiling weapons can feel far more reassuring than trusting in an invisible Spiritual Source for our security and peace.

But each time we choose those false gods of anger and intolerance, or those false idols of wealth and power, we undermine our relationship with the One True God and damage our connection with the One Human Family. When I give credence to a god of judgment and wrath, I'm basically giving myself permission to *be* judgmental and wrathful, and to respond to those around me in a fear-driven, aggressive manner. Likewise, when I give-in to the idols of self-centered materialism and greed, I'm basically denying any responsibility on my part to care for others - for fear that I won't have enough to take care of myself.

However, when you and I stay firmly grounded in the belief that we are *all* precious offspring of that same Divine Source, we will find ourselves being calmer, more confident, and more open to the people around us. We will *want* to connect with one another, as members of this one, beautifully diverse Human Family. We will be much more willing to give to others, and to receive from them, because we have a deeply abiding confidence that - whatever happens in our lives - our Ultimate Source of Life and Compassion will ultimately sustain us and hold us secure.

In these modern times, there are still a multitude of “gods” out there that you and I can choose to serve. But in the final analysis, there is only One “God” truly worthy of our total allegiance and dedication: The One Divine Source of all Life and Love. And today, in this particular place, at this particular moment, you and I *can* choose to follow and serve that Holy One! It won’t mean that we’ve “arrived” at the culmination of our faith journey. Yet it can be one definitive step - one determined choice - which brings us ever closer to that One True Source of all that is good and gracious.

I truly believe that this is a meaningful step for people of any generation! I sincerely believe that contemplating the origin and purpose of our existence, is a critical component of every person’s life - from the ancient Israelite to the modern-day skeptic. And I personally have found that choosing to follow the path of a 2,000 year old teacher gives my modern-day life a direction that is hopeful, energizing, and absolutely fulfilling! So I suppose, this is a “Come to Jesus” invitation after all - not one intended to pressure or manipulate, but to encourage and inspire. Considering all those choices that you and I face each day, having a time-tested teacher and Divine example like Jesus to follow, can be extremely beneficial! His good, and godly, and self-giving life really can help us put all those other “choices” in their proper perspective.