

Make Good Choices

Joshua 24:1-26

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*Make Good Choices Title Slide

As a teenager, as a parent, and as a youth minister, the phrase, “Make good choices,” has played prominently in my life. When I was a teenager, my parents never missed an opportunity to implore me to make good choices. And sometimes I listened. I was a “free spirit” as a teen and often made the opposite of a “good choice.” This did, however, prepare me for parenthood. I am proud to say my own bad choices kept me vigilant and gave me many reasons to talk to my kids about choices and consequences.

My years as a youth minister gave me a front row seat to some really, really bad choices. As I reflected on some of them this week, one incident stood out, probably because I just came from church camp this morning. It happened at a junior high camp where we had about 80 6th-8th grade students at in our care. Two of the counselors, Scott and Dave, were recent college graduates and had been best friends for a long time.

The camp was on a big lake where the campers were allowed to boat and fish. Swimming was not allowed in the lake, however, there was a pool available as it was always hot as a biscuit the week of camp. Our meals were cooked for us at the dining hall. In order to get to the dining hall, we had to cross a bridge which went over an narrow inlet of the lake. Each year when we arrived at camp, we gave the campers a little talking to about being careful on the bridge and that there was absolutely no swimming in this part of the lake.

This particular year, there was a group of 8th grade boys who were in the care of Scott and Dave. The boys were preoccupied with the idea of swimming in the lake, more specifically, jumping off the bridge into the lake. One of the boys’ grandparents lived on the opposite side of the

lake and he reported that he swam in the lake all the time when he stayed with them. One evening, I was in the dining hall as the campers and counselors arrived for supper. Scott and Dave's campers came in very excited, announcing that Scott and Dave would be along in a few minutes. They were on their way back to the cabin to change clothes because they had jumped off the bridge into the lake. And in the words of the campers, "It was epic!"

I was horrified. I couldn't believe they had done that. Not only was it a really poor choice from a leadership standpoint, but there were metal grates at the bottom of the relatively shallow water under the bridge. They were lucky they hadn't been seriously hurt. When Scott and Dave appeared at the dining hall, they were genuinely shocked that I was mad. Their reason for making the bad choice, "We thought the campers would think it was fun." I said, "And that is exactly why you should not have done it." I made the two of them apologize to the whole camp for their choice and review the importance of following safety rules with the campers. Their individual choice was bad for the entire camp. I cannot tell you how many times I said, "Make good choices," the rest of that week.

Today's story is about the people of Israel making an important choice. Joshua, in his farewell speech, right before his death, encouraged the people to make the choice to renew their covenant with God. This encouragement came in the form of a Joshua recalling for them God's actions on their behalf.

* **24** 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. ² 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. ³ 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; ⁴ 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. ⁵ Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. ⁶ 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.^[a] ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.

⁹ Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. ¹¹ When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Gergashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. ¹² I sent the hornet^[a] ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant.

¹⁴ “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. ¹⁵ 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.”

The book of Joshua marks a turning point in the stories of the Hebrew Bible. It recounts the transition of Israel from landless wanderers into the landed people of the promised land. The book depicts an exciting entrance into the promised land, with the virtually unhindered conquest of vast portions under the leadership of Joshua. It is these stories of military conquest that make Joshua a difficult book for some of us. There is much, especially in the first 12 chapters, to disturb us---stories of violent conquests and oppression---all out “Holy War.” All I can say about that is these stories were written down much later than the era in which the events were set. This is not a history book, backed up by facts, and I definitely do not believe God ever condones violence. I do think this story has something to teach us though.

Here we are with the Israelites, the land has been conquered and divided up, and Joshua has gathered the people to remind them of all God had done for them and for their ancestors and to ask them to respond, to recommit themselves to serving God with their whole lives. But, before giving them a chance to respond, he said, “And if you aren’t going to serve God, choose which gods will you be serving...choose now.” (my paraphrase)

Joshua told them he and his household chose covenantal life with YHWH. But he recognized there are other options, other gods and other ways of life. Israel, and each of us today, individually and collectively, must decide who we are, what our priorities are, and to whom we will be loyal.

Each day we make choices:

Will we choose to live in kindness or will we let old hurts color our responses to other human beings?

Will we work for justice in the world or will we cower in fear that we might offend the ones who are benefitting from injustice, unable to see the plight of our neighbors?

Will we entrust to God a meaningful portion of what we have been given or will we hoard our resources, embracing a theology of scarcity, rather than abundance?

Will we engage in practices that draw us near to God and others or will we seek radical independence instead of beloved community?

And beyond our identities as part of this religious community, the civic community continually needs to decide what kind of society it will be. These choices are made through public action, policy formation, budget priorities, and even through the ways in which we plan our cities. Think access to resources, transportation, and grocery stores. Our choice *for* God is also a choice *for* our neighbors.

In the verses following what I read this morning, Joshua received a positive response from his community, but because he knew this was not a decision to be made lightly, he warned them that this was not casual arrangement, kind of a friends with benefits sort of thing. And if we are doing it right, the same is true for us. What God requires is a commitment that will affect every part of our lives —familial, social, political and economic. The God of Israel was different from the other gods from which the people could choose. YHWH was committed to neighborly justice and the organization of the economy for the sake of the weak and vulnerable. But the other gods did not require compassion for one's neighbor. A decision for YHWH entailed socio-economic justice. A decision for the "other gods" led inevitably to socio-economic exploitation, the accumulation of wealth at the expense of neighbors. Such a "religion" without commitment to social

justice creates communities of economic failure. We see this in our 21st century context, even in the little town of Bartlesville.

Joshua snubbed the people's initial promise of loyalty to God. But they responded, "No, we really mean it." Only after abrasive negotiation was covenant made. The ceremony at Shechem, in the verses that follow, is a re-performance of the covenant-making of Mt. Sinai. The new generation decided yet again to try to live its life with this God of covenant.

This little story comes along in the lectionary readings now, right before midterm elections, when we are re-deciding in our society what kind of community we want to be. And it comes along as we are working on the 2019 church budget and estimating our giving for the coming year, looking ahead to our dreams for DCC. Like the ancients, entering a new land, we are being called into new places, to do life and church differently, uncomfortably for some of us. There are a lot of questions that can remain unanswered as we venture into this new land, but there is one question we need to answer every single day, each of us as individuals and each of us as part of this church.

What is before us, as it was before Joshua and his companions, is a life-or-death decision about God and neighbor. The decision *for* God is a recognition that our choices make a difference in the world. The God of covenant is not a doormat who naively accepts selfish anti-neighborliness and the cheapening of human connection. Being *for* our neighbors is an awareness that the ones unlike us merit, because they are present, inclusion in all the community has to offer, so that we are not free to just "do what is best for us individually." Choosing God is choosing the common good, it is choosing each other and our neighbors. Let us make good choices. Amen.