

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 16
Year B

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

The Book of Joshua has a lot of excitement and intrigue. While it is generally described as a book of history, there are also many examples of faith in it. Whether it is the spies Joshua sent into Jericho and Rahab who hid them, or the warriors who faced incredible odds in battle, this book is the story of people who believed God was on their side. It clearly shows what can happen when people of faith act on under the direction of God.

After the forty years of wandering in the wilderness under Moses, the Israelites are finally on the cusp of realizing the promise God gave to Abraham many generations earlier. Moses is dead and his assistant, Joshua, has assumed leadership of the nation. They are not a large nation, but they have been hardened by their experiences. They have already defeated several nations in their trek up from Egypt, but they face the task of entering a rugged land with many fortified cities - Jericho being the first. In each step of the way, when they followed the commands of God, the Israelites were victorious. However, when they went out on their own, they suffered terribly.

In today's reading, the battles are basically over, it is time to divide the land, and for the people to settle down into their new lives. Unfortunately, they have not totally followed the commandments of God by allowing many Canaanites to remain in the land with them. Many Israelites had married into the local tribes. Thus, it was decision time. Would the people follow God or would they follow the local Canaanite gods? In this time when the prevailing thought was a god existed for each territory and there was no universal God, many felt drawn to the gods of the land and not the God of Abraham. The idea of monotheism which we practice today was not universally accepted yet.

In his speech to the nation, which is not included in our reading, Joshua recounts the history of the Israelites from the time Abraham lived east of the Euphrates River, through his migration into the land they had just conquered, and through their time in Egypt. Joshua reminded the people of all that God did for them in Egypt and how God had sustained them throughout the forty years in the wilderness. Finally, Joshua recounts the many blessings of God in their conquest of this Promised Land. He ends with one of the best known lines in all of the Hebrew Scriptures when he asks them to choose who they will serve. They could decide to serve the ancient gods of their ancestors beyond the Euphrates or the Canaanite gods of the people around them, but Joshua takes a different stand, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

We may not know about Baal or any of the other gods the Israelites might have chosen, but we have our own list of gods to serve who vie for our attention. For some it is the lure of great wealth. For others, it is fame. If it is not fame or fortune, it might be a political party, a charismatic leader, or even our nation. Like the ancient people of Israel, we have many choices

of whom we might serve. However, as we look back over our lives and those of our parents and grandparents, we see all that God has done for us. I can recount times that God has helped me through poverty, homelessness, and thinking I could do all for myself while I was floundering. You can look at times when God has healed you of disease or other problems. Like Joshua of old, God is calling us to make a choice - to make a stand in this day.

Who will we serve? Ourselves? Our financial wellbeing? Our social status? Our image of what we think our country should be? For myself, I have decided, like Joshua, that I will serve the Lord. There is nothing in this world that is more important to me than serving God. Yes, you can say, "well you're a minister, so of course you will serve God." But, even beyond that, I choose to serve God because of all God has done for me.

As I read Scripture, I see a clear path between where I was 12 years ago, living in my car in the Colorado winter while working three jobs, to where I am today. God was watching over me, guiding my every step. It was by faith that I packed up and moved here 12 years ago, without a job and without a place to live. I knew God had something for me here in Missouri so I moved. God has blessed me more than I could have ever imagined. I do not choose to follow God because I wear a funny collar and stand up here each week. I follow God because God loved me in the heart of my stupidity. I follow God because God led me here and helped me find a job with a company that worked my schedule around my schooling, knowing that in the end I would be leaving them. I follow God because, in my view and in the words of Peter, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."