

“Choose”
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Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Proper 27, November 8, 2020
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25, Matthew 25:1-13

Whoeee! What a week!

Four years ago, on the Sunday after the election in 2016, I also had the dubious privilege of being the preacher. In my sermon I expressed lament over the division in our nation and called on each of us to listen to one another, especially to those with whom we disagree and to those who feel unheard. I attempted to challenge all of us to put our entire hope and trust in God alone, not in money, status, political parties, presidents, or any of this world’s powers.

And now here we are again, four years later, on the Sunday after an election, in a nation divided, after a very long week of waiting. Like the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom who is very much later than expected, we spent the week waiting for results that were very much later than expected.

How I wish I were like the wise bridesmaids with their neatly trimmed lamps and extra oil, completely prepared. How I wish I could say something that would inspire us to listen better, trust God more, and to use our waiting time to prepare to enter the kingdom of God when it comes. How I wish I knew what to say to banish our fear and anger. How I wish that any preacher’s words about loving God and loving all of our neighbors would enable us to do it better. If we could just get the words right, say all the things in the perfect way, we just know it would make a difference.

But the truth is that none of that is up to me. My job is much simpler than that. My job is to point to God, to proclaim the good news of Jesus as best I can, and to leave the rest in God's hands. What you hear is between you and God. So today I'm going to try to keep it simple. I'm going to offer you a word, an assignment, and a song.

The word is *choose*.

“*Choose* this day whom you will serve.”

Joshua says these words when he's old and getting ready to die. He's spent his life in service to the Lord after taking over leadership of the ancient Israelites from Moses. He's led the people of God through many battles on their way to a secure place in the Land of Canaan, trusting in the Lord to deliver the people from their enemies and to guide them out of the wilderness and into abundant life in the promised land.

Joshua offers the people a choice - You can serve the old gods or the gods of the Amorites who share the land now. He doesn't speak badly of other gods, just states them as an option. Or they can serve the God of Abraham who did many saving deeds for the Hebrew people. He warns them how difficult it will be if they choose to serve the Lord and that there will be consequences if they turn away.

“Choose this day whom you will serve...” He goes on to say, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

And then he leaves it up to them. In that moment, they choose to renew their covenant with God, just as we renew our baptismal covenant at various occasions throughout the year.

They will keep that covenant, serving the Lord their God, for as long as Joshua lives, and then they will turn away to serve other gods. And it will not go well for them when they do. And the cycle will just keep repeating and repeating.

The choice was theirs. The choice is ours. God gives us endless choice. Choose this day whom you will serve.

The *assignment* I have for you is to turn to page 302 in the Book of Common Prayer. If you don't have one at home, you can find it online at www.bcponline.org. I invite you to read through the baptismal liturgy. Starting with the renunciations of evil and sin and moving through the affirmations.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ as your Savior?

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

Answer those questions for yourself. Think about what they mean to you and if you really choose them.

Then read through the baptismal covenant, our covenant with God, in which everything we do, every choice we make ought to be grounded. The Apostle's Creed and then the questions about continuing in the Apostles' teachings, the breaking of bread and prayer, resisting evil and repenting of sin, proclaiming

God's good news, respecting the dignity of every human being, seeking to serve Christ in every person, striving for justice and peace.

Spend some time with these questions. What do they mean for you?

Is this a covenant you can keep? Of course, with God's help, and knowing that we can always repent and return to the Lord when we find ourselves breaking it.

Saying yes to these questions is what it means to choose to follow Jesus.

In this time of great tension in our country, reaffirming our baptismal covenant means that we have to ask ourselves if we can "regard those in our congregation who voted differently than we did as fellow and faithful Christians? And, more broadly, can we regard those in our larger community and country as fellow children of God... And, by doing this, leave judgment to the Lord?"¹

Choose this day whom you will serve.

The kingdom of God is near. It's coming. We wait and wait and wait like the bridesmaids. Not only for election results and for the pandemic to end and for the new life that will come once the virus is over. We are also waiting for Jesus to return.

How will we choose to wait? If the oil in our lamps runs low, we can run around scrounging for more and miss him altogether, or we can trust that whatever we have will be enough because whatever we need will be provided by the one who comes.

¹ David Lose, In the Meantime, <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/pentecost-23-a-reserving-judgment/>.

I know few things more helpful to those with low oil reserves than a good camp song. So I'm going to sing one for you from my days at camp.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning

Give me oil in my lamp, I pray

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning

Keep me burning till the break of day.

Sing hosanna, Sing hosanna, Sing hosanna to the king of kings

Sing hosanna, Sing hosanna, Sing hosanna to the king.

Beloved people of God – we get to choose whom we will serve. That choice will inform all of our actions that follow. God will give us what we need. The kingdom is coming. What will you do while you wait?