

Proper 27, Pentecost 29, November 9, 2008, Sermon by The Rev. Robert L. Hart

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25, Psalm 78, I Thessalonians 4: 13-18, Matthew 25: 1-13

+In the Name of God, the holy and life-giving Trinity. Amen.

We've become used to large political rallies. The TV news has brought us the sight of huge rallies for the candidates running for the presidency. My brother and his family were in the stadium in Denver when Barack Obama accepted the nomination. My daughter was in Grant Park in Chicago last Tuesday night for that historic political rally. Some of you may have attended a rally here in Detroit.

The scene described in the Book Joshua this morning looks a bit like a political rally. Joshua has all the tribes of Israel gathered before him Shechem. They've reentered the Promised Land. They've reclaimed the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now Joshua feels it's time for the people to stand up and make a covenant with the God who brought them thus far.

So Joshua begins to make a speech. He rallies the Israelites. He reminds them of their history, how God took them from service to other gods and led them to a land and made them a people. Then Joshua asks something of the Israelites, "serve God in sincerity and faithfulness." He puts it before them as a matter of ultimate choice. "Choose this day whom you will serve." Will you serve the gods of the peoples around you or will you serve God? Joshua makes clear his choice, "...as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

The people start to catch the spirit of the rally. They shout back, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord..." They rehearse all that God did for them and rescued them from slavery in Egypt and how God gave them this land they now occupy. "Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

But Joshua uses this emotional response to caution them and reinforce their decision. He tells them God is holy. Don't sign up for something you can't fulfill. God might turn and do you harm if you play false with your promise to serve him.

Now the people are really on a roll. They roar back, "No, we will serve the Lord!" Joshua seals the deal. Remember what you have said. You are witnesses against yourselves that you've chosen to follow and serve God. And the people shout, "The Lord our God we will serve and him we will obey."

The Israelites entered into a covenant with God on that day. It is a decision that has down to us in the form of our baptismal covenant and in our weekly communion where we seal our covenant with God in Christ "to do the work [God] has given us to do and to love and serve him as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord."

I find in this scene at Shechem something not dissimilar to what our President elect, Barack Obama, has been doing at his rallies right up to his speech on election night. Joshua keeps asking the people to serve God. And the people shout back, in effect, "Yes, we can." That's really what the Israelites said when Joshua put the question to them if they were willing and able to serve their God. "Yes, we can."

Barack Obama is a master of oratory. He is a Joshua among us. If you've been listening closely, he reminds us of who we are and what we can accomplish if we work together. And the crowd roars back, "Yes, we can." In his speech on Tuesday you could hear clearly that he was saying we have to reconstruct our country together. He was asking us to serve, to get involved. And the people kept responding, "Yes, we can."

I wanted to discover what the President elect had in mind. You can do this too. There is a remarkable website www.change.gov. This is the Presidential transition website. I clicked on the tab about service. It says, "The Obama administration will call on Americans to serve in order to meet the nation's challenges. Then it lists initiatives such as Americorps, Peace Corps, new things like Health

Corps, Clean Energy Corps, Veterans Corps. The site asks that middle and high school you serve a minimum of 50 hours of community service and college kids, 100 hours. The section concludes, "When you choose to serve ... you are connected to that fundamental American ideal of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all our citizens."

Joshua was more dramatic but Barack Obama has got the idea. Ask the people to make a commitment to the thing that matters most. Make sure they understand the commitment and how difficult it can be. Finally get them to say "yes" one more time. At that point the work begins.

Nations like churches work best when the people are committed and ready and willing to serve for the sake of their mission as a nation or as a church. We're one of the few nations on earth where you can state the mission. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." "In order to form a more perfect union." "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal."

We, as Christians, draw on the creed of ancient Israel and add to it. Our mission is clear. We are dedicated and committed to love God and to love our neighbor. We are pledged to repent and return to the Lord and to respect the dignity of every human being. And to this mission we have responded, "Yes, we can." "I will with God's help."

In these difficult times, I hope and trust we will roll up our sleeves and serve our country and fellow citizens. It will take that to put our nation back together. The signs are good. So many of us have responded, "Yes, we can."

But that which Christ asks of us is a commitment more enduring than that asked by our President and country. Ours is an eternal covenant like that Joshua made with the Israelites. The mission of God as expressed here at Christ Church is one small part of a universal mission. So, sign a pledge card. Get involved in the ministry here and through this community. Wherever and whatever you do, do it in the name of Christ. God seeks of us an undivided loyalty. Alwe have to say is, "Yes, we can."