

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 11/12/2023, Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” That’s such a snappy sound bite and a verse that at least some of us probably have on plaques or key chains or on calligraphy in a decorated frame in our home. Reducing such a sweeping statement to a snappy sentiment tries to tame it. Of course we here in the house of St. David’s will serve the Lord. Of course those Israelites on the brink of a new, long-promised life in the Holy Land would choose to serve the Lord. Speed it up, Joshua, because we are ready to party, after fleeing oppression and then decades of wandering followed by war.

Notice that Joshua pushed back when the people told him that they would serve the Lord because they had witnessed great signs and had been protected by God. Joshua warned them ominously that God was jealous and would not tolerate them serving other gods. God was not willing to be one of many.

The people insisted “No, we will serve the Lord!” Joshua then got a little lawyerly on them, saying that they were witnesses against themselves. They embraced this, even after he asserted that this meant they must put away the foreign gods among them.

I talked to you not long ago about the golden calf, and about how fear can lead us to idolatry. But these people were not afraid. Joshua was speaking to them at the end of his life, after the wandering in the wilderness was over and the Promised Land was conquered. Everything was just right for these Israelites in that moment, and when everything is going well, just like when we feel afraid, we can be ripe for temptation to idolatry.

One of the Eucharistic prayers in our prayer book asks God to “deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.” Many people come to church in times of difficulty and darkness, seeking solace and pardon. Reassurance. And that is beautiful and necessary, and the church is here for you.

But what about when things are going well? When much is right in your world—you’re employed, you’re healthy, your family is mostly OK—doesn’t it become easy to drift away during those times?

Joshua told the people who insisted that they, too, wanted to choose to serve the Lord that this meant putting away the foreign gods that were among them. They’d been clinging to other idols, maybe...just in case? What if they were wrong about God? What would it hurt to hang on to this foreign god?

Apparently, it would hurt God. God longs to be the only god in our life.

Now as I pointed out with the golden calf, we might think that choosing not to serve idols is easier than it actually is. What do you *truly* value? Could any of those things become an idol? Examine how you spend your time and your money. Those two things will tell you something about what you value. Now I understand there may be some subtlety here. Perhaps you have to work ungodly hours not because you don’t love your family but because you do and you need to

work that much to make ends meet. But our jobs can be a slippery slope. Are you working a lot because you have to in order to make ends meet, or are you a workaholic?

In other words, what distracts you from God? What distracts you from prioritizing your spiritual life? Please understand that I am not saying you need to spend all of your time in this church building to be a faithful person; but I do believe that you need to infuse all that you do with your faith. You need to find a way to tie your time, your work, your family and your hobbies with your faith. I urge us all to reflect on how we spend our time and money and ensure that these things align with our Christian values. When I walk in the early mornings, for example, I walk for my health, and also to pray. I listen to Morning Prayer, to scripture, and this draws me closer to God. Or when I make dinner for my husband, I remember our marriage vows, and I believe prioritizing this relationship is a way of serving the Lord. Doing dishes can be in line with our worship. Always expecting someone else to clean up after us, however, can be a sign that we think a little too highly of ourselves.

I waste time and money on all sorts of things that are idols of a sort. I love to watch trashy television shows on Bravo and play solitaire on my phone. I let my phone interrupt me when I should be giving someone else my full attention. I buy more books than I can read and more clothes than I can wear. I screw up all the time and have to repent and return to the Lord per my baptismal vows [vows that we all renewed together last Sunday].

Joshua declared in today's Old Testament reading, "Choose this day whom you will serve." I love the drama in that declaration. It makes me think of the drama of baptisms like the two we had last week. But a baptism, like this covenant Joshua and the people made in Shechem, is not the end. They underwent this one-time covenant just as we are baptized once only, but then we must make little decisions every day to stay on the path. Every day we must choose, again, whom we will serve.

Have you chosen whom you will serve? How have you veered offtrack? What idols do you need to unload?