

CHARACTER MEANS CHOOSING

As for Us

Joshua 24:14-18

November 3, 2024

Stop me if you have heard or spoken these seven words in recent days: *I just can't wait until it's over.* I heard it four times from parishioners last Sunday alone. In fact, the phrase feels like a kind of mantra for the moment we're in, the one sentiment that transcends all our division and unites everyone. We are weary with our worry as we wait for what comes next. We are exhausted by our outrage. I empathize with all who feel this way; I understand the hope that soon and very soon the fever will break, the temperature will drop, and our relationships can be restored. *I just can't wait until it's over.*

This morning, I want to suggest that, from the perspective of faith, this yearning is misguided. Here's why. Moments of consequential decision do not arrive in four-year cycles. We must be careful not to circumscribe our God-given responsibility to deadlines of human construction.

Four weeks ago, here at Second, we introduced a covenant for faithful living in divided times. Our hope was to offer some scriptural guidance for how people of Christian faith can respond to situations of hostility or dissension. We listed five promises built on Biblical values that shape our character. Over the last month, this covenant has taken root and branched out. I've loved hearing stories of members who put the covenant on the refrigerator for daily viewing. One man this week told me that he had taped it to his desk right next to his keyboard. When I asked him why, he said, "Well, that's the place I'm most apt to fall short." I've loved hearing how the covenant has sparked conversation at dinner tables and workplaces and church meetings. Earlier this week, I heard from a pastor in Mendocino in Northern California who used the covenant in a retreat with his church leaders last weekend. The pastor wrote me, "Please convey to the makers of the covenant that [our elders]

resonated with the scriptural passages. It led to deep conversations, vulnerability, and a commitment to listen to one another. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Now, imagine that next Sunday I stood before you and said, "Good news! It's over. Mission accomplished. You may now rip up those covenants and abandon those promises. Live however you choose now." I trust you get the point. The commitments contained in the covenant remind us that we have ongoing agency. We are not pawns positioned by powerful players who manage our every move. We make choices. Choices that reveal our moral core and determine our direction. Character means choosing. This week and every week.

The words I just read come from the very end of the book of Joshua, just before the old man dies at 110 years old. This is Joshua's final speech, his last chance to address his people, the ones who raised him up and taught him the faith, the ones who respected him enough to follow his lead after the death of his mentor Moses.

Joshua gathers them at Shechem. The place matters. It is the same spot God appeared to Abraham with a covenant of faithfulness generations earlier. And in that sacred space, Joshua uses his final words to urge this people to reaffirm that covenant, to renew their commitment. He asks them to make a choice, and he demands that they do it immediately—choose *this day* whom you will serve. The choice is stark. Two roads diverge. Idolatry or fidelity. It's time to choose.

*Whom will you **serve**?*

Joshua's language is precise, and it is repeated. Some version of the Hebrew word *abad* appears nine times in these five verses. What does it mean? Most translations

use *serve*. “Choose this day whom you will serve.” But Hebrew is an elastic language, and in other places the word is translated *worship, honor, cherish, adore*. At its heart, this little word *abad* describes the act of giving oneself entirely, of wholly committing, forsaking all else to fully invest in what matters most to you. That’s the choice.

Whom will you **serve**? It would be appropriate to ask it this way: who is your God?

To whom do you pledge ultimate loyalty, primary allegiance, your deepest soul-level devotion? Joshua is not naïve. He knows that there will be other options. And this is no less true for us. Every day we make choices that reflect our priorities, that disclose our first principles. If we are guided by faith, we must carefully examine our hearts and honestly ask: *does this decision honor, cherish, serve God?* Because, listen to this: you will come more and more to resemble what you serve. Over time, we become what we worship. I have seen it.

If you worship wealth, you will become singularly focused on achieving material success, piling up possessions that amount to nothing when your earthly journey is over. Do not worship wealth.

If you worship power, you will come to regard other people as means to an end. You will sacrifice your integrity for imagined authority. The power you acquire will be built on a foundation of sand, swept away when the tides change. Do not worship power.

If you worship political ideology, self-righteous pride will come to consume you. Tests of partisan purity will replace meaningful relationships and leave you empty and alone. Do not worship political ideology.

If you worship human leaders, you will find yourself justifying actions you once condemned, adjusting your values in ways that would ultimately be unrecognizable to your former self. Do not worship human leaders.

Now, this is a partial list. John Calvin said that the human mind is a permanent factory of idols—that we are endlessly creating and forming new gods to whom we bow down. Karl Barth suggested that even religion

itself becomes an idol when we worship our beliefs instead of the God who never fits in the boxes we construct. You see, there are many would-be masters competing for our adoration.

Which one will **we** serve? The answer you give will reveal your character.

In an act of leadership, Joshua speaks first. “As for me and my family,” he says, “we choose the Lord. We will serve the Lord. Come what may, we pledge ourselves to God’s way. We choose to be led by the values of our faith no matter what.”

This is the 274th sermon I have preached at Second Church. You have no doubt learned that I am not as gifted as Joshua in the art of succinct summation. Give me time—I’m not 110 yet. Still, taking my cue from this courageous leader, I will be very clear. I firmly believe the central question facing us is unchanged by the passage of millennia.

Whom will we serve?

To whom will we give our hearts, our souls, ourselves?

What kind of witness will we pass on to our children and generations yet to come?

These questions are not artificial. They’re not academic. They’re not abstract, and they are not avoidable. They sit here with us. This week. Every week.

Today, we remember the saints. Those whose race is over. Today, we recognize faithful members of this church for more than fifty years. And today, we can renew the commitment that has animated this church for nearly two centuries. The commitment that led your founding pastor, Henry Ward Beecher, to courageously speak against the evil of slavery at great personal risk. The commitment that has given rise to initiatives aimed at reconciliation, compassion for the stranger, welcome of all, and unity across difference. The commitment to serve only God here.

Yes, two roads diverge, and it is time to choose. But first, examine your heart. In the days ahead our democracy will make consequential decisions of a political nature.

We know that. I for one remain convinced that, at its best, politics is a means by which we love our neighbors and care for the most vulnerable among us. We carry a weighty responsibility. We have been given a precious gift. We should neglect neither.

Weighty responsibility. Precious gift. Joshua sees both as he looks back on his journey and forward at his people's future. Second Church, this is how I see our life together. Gifted by those whose witness we recall today, we have a responsibility to stand firm in the face of any message or messenger that devalues the dignity of any person, to stand up for the values that shape our character in the image of God's unyielding love. This will require our collective faith and all the courage we can muster. It will require us to commit to each other and to commit to Christ even when the foundations under our feet are shaking.

This week. Every week. Hold on to these covenants, my friends.

Now, I am no Joshua. We've established that. But here is what I pledge to you:

I will choose to serve God.

I will trust that the One who has led us this far will not leave us now.

I will seek the path of integrity, mercy, compassion for all. And I will fail. And I will keep trying. And I will trust your forgiveness as I offer you my own.

Joshua speaks with intimacy. He's coming to the end. He reflects on his household. His family.

I have two sons. Eleven and seven years old. All week long I've been thinking about them. When I come to the end, when my name is read in remembrance, will they be proud of the witness I have shared, the choices I have made? With all my heart, I want them to see in me that faith makes a difference. I want to show them, in the words I speak and the way I act, that faithfulness is not a badge we wear, not a prize we earn. It is a choice to walk in the way of love. And when they ask, and they do ask, "Dad, why did you make this decision?" I want to answer, "because I love and trust God. Because I love and trust you." This week. Every week.

The name Joshua means "the Lord is salvation." Only God saves. When the name moves from Hebrew to Greek to Latin, the meaning stays the same, but Joshua becomes Jesus. The Lord is our salvation.

He told us the truth.

You cannot serve two masters.

It's time to choose.

This week. Every week.

Choose whom you will serve.

Amen.