

Human Things and Divine Things 2021
 Joshua 24:1, 14-21 Mark 8:27-37

Joshua 24:1, 14-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!”

Mark 8:27-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

A year ago or so I watched as a young man become an American citizen.

It was a wonderful and joyful experience to observe and listen,
inspiring to witness his pledge of allegiance and loyalty.

I was sitting with his family, and they showed me his study-book
 with all he had learned about American history and our government.

And although he was born in Mexico,
 all of that history he'd learned became **his story.**

Now he is a part in that story and that history is a part of who he is.

In the scene described by the Joshua 24 passage,

something like that was going on when they gathered at Shechem.
From time to time everyone residing in Israel would gather,
descendants of the slaves freed from Egyptian bondage,
and everyone who had moved into the land since then.

Stories of mighty acts of God redeeming the people were remembered,
including the stories about how God provided & protected them
all during their long wilderness journey and **were retold.**

This gathering, this remembering and the retelling of their history
is what gave them their identity as the chosen people the Lord,
and what shaped and formed them into a **community
of those drawn into a covenant relationship with God.**

Even for those who were not blood-descendants of the Israelites,
by claiming those stories and experiences as their own history,
they too became a part of that covenant community much like
an immigrant learning about American history to become a citizen.

Just as the people of Israel were defined as the community
gathered by God through the Exodus & wilderness journey,
so too we of the Church are defined as **the community
gathered by God through the Good News of Jesus Christ.**
That is what provides our hope, identity and unity as Christians.

And by the power of that gospel story retold, as Christ's followers,
whatever else is going on in this world,
whatever anyone else may say or believe,
we are a community of faith, defined by our commitment to Jesus,
which has power to transform & guide every aspect of our living...

... which means that as the Church, as the community of believers
who have been shaped and formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ,
as we grow deeper into that story, we **more & more reflect
God's gracious love by the way we behave & how we live...**

... which is our faithful response, as Joshua explained in vs. 14-15.

Now therefore *revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the
gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are
unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors
served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as
for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

These verses are about commitment. You'll make your own decision,
but this how we going to do things in my home, **we will serve the LORD.**
Joshua's saying you're not being coerced. It's entirely **your choice,**
but these are the stories, values and truths of God
by which my household and I will live our lives.

The phrases, *the gods your ancestors served,* and *the gods of the Amorites,*
also represent the false gods of our world and culture,
for we can turn even worthy and good things into idols...

... things that **distract or dominate our days & the work of our lives,**
if we don't' consciously reserve enough space and time for God.

Idolatry is not just bowing down to a graven image or to a statue.
It is whenever we place anything before God in our lives,
and can be anything that matters more to us than the Lord.

It is a question of priority -- who or what will be the God I serve?,
and what we decide to do about God's **gift and blessing of life**
as an instrument of grace, to heal and transform this world.

No, as Christians are not the Light. Jesus is the Light of the world,
but we are called & equipped **to reflect that Light into dark places.**

Our walk with God is about making our choices and decisions
for us to believe & receive what God promises, -- or to reject.
We decide, one way or the other, and God does allow our free choice.
But what God does not allow
is a comfortable, complacent, middle ground of undecided.

Israel was called and challenged
to live out the stories of their shared experiences with God,
by committing their lives
to being **that community** focused and faithful to God,
and not be seduced by the other and lesser gods of this world,
or by wanting to be more like everyone else around them.

In our world and in our lives,
there are many other voices seeking our attention & loyalty.

We are always under pressure from our world and the demands of life,
to compromise on integrity, commitment and loyalty to God alone,
because all this other stuff can crowd out **God from our lives.**

Really, the question is, who or what will we choose to serve?

That is also the central focus and concern in the Mark 8 text.
In this passage, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem,
to suffer and die, so to fulfill the purpose for which he was sent.

Along his journey toward Jerusalem and the cross, vs. 27-28

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

That part was easy, but after telling him about the popular opinion,
Jesus pushes them to go a bit deeper and gets more personal, vs. 29.

Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"

This is a far more pointed & demanding inquiry,

"But who do you say that I am?"

In the original Greek, the word, "you" is repeated for emphasis,
translated literally, "But you, who do you say that I am?"

This is far more than simply knowing the right facts,
but is a relational inquiry that is also **a call for commitment.**

So who is Jesus? Peter answers quite correctly, "You are the Messiah."
And although he does have that essential facts straight,
it turns out that his understanding was deficient.

"Yes Peter, Jesus really is the Messiah,
but not the Messiah you were expecting or wanted."

Peter, like most people of Israel,
expected the Messiah to be a King David-like conquering hero,
who would overthrow the hated Roman occupation,
and return things back to the glory days of Israel.

But then Jesus explained what was really going to happen, vs. 31-32

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected
by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said
all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

Peter's trying to protect Jesus from the suffering and death part
which puts him in direct opposition against God's purpose and plan...

... and so he receives a sharp rebuke from Jesus vs. 33:

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human
things."

So why does Jesus speak so harshly to Peter?

You remember that just after his baptism,
that Satan tempted Jesus during 40 days alone in the wilderness,
trying to entice him to turn aside from true obedience to God.

Peter was doing the same thing – his role is the same project as Satan,
both trying to dissuade Jesus from obeying - fulfilling God's plan.

That also describes a major challenge that we too face in life,
compromising our faith & discipleship to go along with this world,
rather than **submitting our lives & desires to God's will & purpose.**

Discipleship is responding to God's gracious love through Jesus
with our full and obedient trust, an open and receptive heart.

It's offering ourselves as faithful servants of Christ,
not by reciting a Bible verse, catechism or doctrine,
but at issue is how we live and love and serve.

**The question is more than if I have invited Jesus into my heart,
but also, what have I done with Jesus since he got there? vs. 34**

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my
followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

If I'm responding the way Jesus called me to follow in discipleship,

then that will be reflected in my walk and my ongoing relationships,
because following Jesus will affect every aspect of my life
which will guide and direct how I live out in the world.

It's about learning to say: "Not my will, but thy will be done."

It's having our focus & trust in God, rather than ourselves.

Only when I am willing to set aside my own agenda, desires and plans
can I hope to hear his voice and discern the true that God intends.

Jesus asks, and **demand**s an answer, do you really know and trust me,
do you love me, **enough, to deny yourself, to take up your cross,**
and will you commit to following me,
even when it's difficult, demanding, inconvenient or scary?

So what am I choosing, what is nearer and dearer than Jesus Christ,
that if put to the test, what matters more to me than the Lord?,
and what do I most fear or refuse to give up and submit to God?

Lent is more than a matter of giving up certain pleasures or things,
but is a real shift in focus **off of ourselves and our desires,**
and onto God's will & gracious healing purpose in this world.

That is our appropriate response for what the Lord has done for us.

And this is not a static, one-time decision & then we're all done
but it's a progressively deepening relationship with Jesus,
that as we live and experience life with Jesus, over a life time,
it transforms us, by reshaping our attitude, values & purpose...
...a deeper spiritually for which there's no fast-track or shortcut.

I've been honored to know a number of spiritually mature Christians,
and some of the characteristics that I have observed have been:
calm and unflappable, forgiving and graciously loving,
humble and gentle, encouraging, appreciative & hopeful-

-and such spiritual maturity has always been **the blessed result**
of having experienced & endured trouble & tribulation over time,
toward a patient & trusting, faithful & authentic relationship,
through many years, of challenges & struggles in life,
and living through both successes & painful failures.

Unlike Twitter and Facebook, to follow Jesus demands a commitment.

I know that if I get on I- 40 in Albq going East, that eventually
I will end up on Market Street in Wilmington, North Carolina.
So too, the life paths that we choose have consequences,
and will end up leading us to a specific destination...

**... and it only makes sense to make sure that the road we are on
is the one that leads to where in the end, we want to be.**

During Lent, let us look deeply, carefully and honestly
at the roadway signs indicating the direction of our lives,
so that at the end we're able to look back and **in gratitude say,**
my life did have purpose and meaning, integrity and connection,
and I can be satisfied for having lived out my mortal life well.

To that end, let me give you a short list, nothing spectacular, just some of the specific things that been working for me.

- 1st Make prayer an on-going priority, listening and speaking to God, so that before your feet hit the floor in the morning, thank God for the for the night's rest and for the new day, and whatever else you can think of before getting up.

Then throughout the day be in silent conversation with God as through gratitude, we notice & appreciate God's blessings, **and try to pause before you speak or act to reflect on God, and consider how Jesus would have you respond in that situation.**

- 2nd Try to read a chapter of Scripture or a meditation each day, which becomes a place for quiet reflection and contemplation, for a human soul to rest and to listen and to wait upon God.

I have frequently found that the helpful insight I most need will come from a Bible text that I have most recently read.

- 3rd Set aside deliberate time and space to wait- to delay in silence. **Just pause & be still, and waste a little time alone with God.**

- 4th Focus and refocus on relationships, **with both God and neighbor.** Consider, how I can better connect with those in my life, by taking the focus off me and my agenda for a while to listen and simply be in the present with another.

This is by no means a complete list, but it's a start during Lent, for as Jesus explains **four separate times in the Gospels**, vs. 34-37

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. What will it profit to gain the whole world and forfeit your life? Indeed, what can you give in return for your life?"