

In Sincerity and in Faithfulness 2024  
 Joshua 24:1, 14-17, 19, 21-24 Mark 8:27-38

Joshua 24:1, 14-17, 19, 21-24 (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. <sup>14</sup>“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. <sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup>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; <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” <sup>22</sup>Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” <sup>23</sup>He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” <sup>24</sup>The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”

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

<sup>27</sup>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?” <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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.” <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

Years back, I remember that we began the school day each morning  
 by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance together during homeroom  
 which was to help foster our sense of patriotism and loyalty.

Facing the flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance as a class  
 reaffirmed that we too had a connection and we had a stake

in the history, the culture and the values of our country.

I think it also helped me develop a sense that I am an American,  
and that through that shared citizenship,  
I am part of something far bigger and more grand  
than just my own interests, wants and desires.

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.

The mighty acts of God redeeming/freeing the slaves 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,  
gave and reinforced their identity as the chosen people the Lord,  
which shaped and formed them into a specific community  
of those drawn into a covenant relationship with God,  
which was to direct how they were to live together.

Even for those who were not biological descendants of the Israelites,  
by claiming those stories & experiences **as now their own history**,  
they too became a part of that covenant community ... much like  
becoming a citizen by learning American history & government.

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 identity, hope 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 around us,  
and 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 a community of believers,  
we're still being shaped and formed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ  
as we grow deeper into that story, and called to **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,  
this is how we're 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**,  
can also represent the false gods of **our world & culture**,  
for we can turn even worthy and good things into idols...

... anything can **distract or dominate our days & the work of our lives**,  
**if we don't consciously reserve specific 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 Christ in our lives,  
which 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 will we decide to do about God's **gift and blessing of life**  
**as an instrument of grace, to heal and transform this world?**

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 & becoming **that community** focused and faithful to God,  
**and not be seduced by the other and lesser gods of this world.**

In our world and in our lives, and in our choices and options  
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?"

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,  
or even doing well enough to pass a theology exam,  
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,  
but 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 at that time  
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 is 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 respond 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, and an open & receptive heart.

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,**

and **how are grace and faith guiding our days of life? 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.

Jesus explains further, that **If any want to become my followers,**  
then there are **3 conditions that will define discipleship:**

1<sup>st</sup> condition: **Let them deny themselves**

not necessarily a call to avoid life's pleasures and delights,  
but it is learning to say: "Not my will, but thy will be done."

It's handing over the keys & control over our lives and pet projects,  
and increasingly expose our life's every nook and cranny to Jesus,  
daring to open even our most secret closets & hiding places  
by saying: "Lord, you take charge, you rule throughout."

2<sup>nd</sup> condition: **Take up your cross**

that was a terrifying and shocking image of torture and death,  
of someone prepared to die, having surrendered their life.

**Take up your cross**

Also refers to our own particular cross, not someone else's,  
and not some other more desirable cross of our own choosing.

In fact my cross is probably the one I most don't want to take up  
and that makes me feel troubled, anxious, fearful and insecure.

One time, with some pride a pastor was showing off his church,  
pointing out the rich carpet, imported pews and costly artwork,  
and said that the cross alone, cost them ten thousand dollars.

Apparently not all that impressed, the visitor replied,

**"You got cheated, time was when Christians could get them for free."**

3<sup>rd</sup> condition: **Follow me**

This is the same language as the original call to the disciples  
and in this passage it defines Christian discipleship---

- which means that following Jesus will often come with a cost,  
a sacrifice for the sake of faithful obedience to the Lord.

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.

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?

That means a real shift in focus **off of ourselves and our desires,**  
**and it's our appropriate response for what the Lord has done for us.**

This is not a static, one-time decision and then we're all done,  
but is a progressively deepening relationship with Jesus,  
as we live & experience life with Jesus, over a life time.

It will transform us by reshaping our attitude, our values & purpose,  
**a deeper spiritually for which there is 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.

I know that if I get on I- 40 in Albq. heading East, that eventually  
I will end up on Market Street in Wilmington, North Carolina.  
So too, the life paths that we choose have consequences,  
**hopefully the one that leads to where in the end, we want to be...**

... so that at the end we're able to look back and **in gratitude say,**  
**my life did have purpose & meaning, integrity & connection,**  
**I can be satisfied for having lived out my mortal life well.**

Somehow, someday, today, God is inviting each of us to an adventure,  
which the Apostle Paul explains this way, *Romans 12:1-2, (The Message)*

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your  
sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.  
Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted  
to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be  
changed from the inside out, for God brings the best out of you... choose this day whom you will serve.