

Sermon (11/12/17, Joshua 24: 1-3, 14-25):

Sometime before next summer, I need to purchase a new lawnmower. The one we have is old and has sputtered and spewed its last breath.

Doing some research online, I was reminded again of the plethora of choices we have when making a purchase like this. In the case of lawnmowers there are push ones, self-propelled ones, electric starts, pull cord starts, mulching ones, bagging ones, wide ones, not so wide ones, wow! There are also all those reviews people provide running the gamut from they love it to they hate it.

Our lives are filled with choices. Some of them are not so weighty like deciding on what to have for dinner or whether it will be a double mocha latte day or a cappuccino. Some of them have long reaching implications like the degree we decide to pursue in College.

In the year 2000 a movie entitled 'The Family Man' was released. It tells the story of Jack Campbell who is given a glimpse of what his life might have been like if he had made different choices.

At the opening of the film, Jack is a single Wall Street Executive living in New York City. He has a luxury apartment, drives a Ferrari, and is on the verge of pulling off a multibillion dollar merger.

On Christmas Day, a guardian angel gives Jack a gift. He temporarily transports him to an alternate reality where he finds himself married to his girlfriend of many years ago. He has children, drives an old mini-van, struggles to pay his mortgage, and he works for his Father-In-Law who owns a Tire Business. At first, Jack struggles with this radically different life but, eventually, it grows on him. So much so that when he returns to his Wall Street Executive life, he wants nothing more than to have his life back as a Family Man.

Some choices are like that. They are pivotal, life shaping, and profoundly impactful.

For the past number of weeks, we have been following the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt to the threshold of the Promised Land. Just before today's story Moses died and the leadership of the Hebrew people had been placed into the hands of Moses' successor, Joshua, who would lead them into the Promised Land.

Today, we join the Hebrew people at another pivotal stage. At this point, they are well settled in their new home. Joshua has led them well but now Joshua's time with them is coming to an end. The Hebrew people are about to face another significant new chapter in their lives.

Before Joshua's departure, he calls the Hebrew community together for a covenant renewal ceremony, during which the Hebrew people will be invited to

reiterate their commitment to Yahweh, God.

It's significant to learn that this is happening in the city of Shechem. The Hebrew people did not forcibly take over this city but had assimilated into the community that existed there. Shechem was a bustling city and its culture was polytheistic meaning that people worshiped many different gods.

The first thing Joshua does in his speech is to remind them that Shechem is also the place where Yahweh called their ancestor Abraham. Before that call, Abraham was among those in this community who had worshiped multiple gods.

The calling of Abraham marked the introduction of the first monotheistic faith tradition where Yahweh was believed to be the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, the one and only true God of all things.

In Shechem, the Hebrew people were surrounded by many choices of gods to worship. Some of these gods were even quite attractive and enticing. The question the Hebrew people faced was this, would they remain true to Yahweh? Would they trade in their allegiance to Yahweh for other gods more to their liking?

It's a big question. Mortal memories tend to be selective and short. We are easily swooped off our feet by things that make seductive promises. As his last act as the leader of the Hebrew people, Joshua understands this moment to be a critical one. It is time for the Hebrew people to make a choice among many choices. Whom will they serve? Whom will they give their hearts to? Who will be their compass by which all other paths are determined?

'Whom will you serve?' Joshua asks. 'Will it be the enticing cultic gods that Abram once worshiped, or will it be the Lord, Yahweh, whom Abram ultimately gave his life to?'

The Hebrew people are quick to respond. They choose Yahweh. Joshua isn't satisfied though. He pushes them hard. 'You cannot serve the Lord,' He says. 'For he is holy, and he is jealous, and he does not do well if you make this commitment and then renege on it.'

The Hebrew people push back declaring that Joshua is dead wrong. They can and will be faithful to God. They will serve Yahweh and Yahweh alone.

Joshua then makes it clear just how critical their choice is in this land with so many other tempting choices. Their survival, their well-being will hinge upon their ability to keep their commitment. Joshua tells them they must put away all other gods. Yahweh demands their all. The Hebrew people again reiterate that this is no wishy-washy decision on their part. They are determined to give their lives to Yahweh. The covenant is renewed. They will be Yahweh's people just as Yahweh has claimed to be their God.

A time of covenant renewal. In the Biblical text these moments seem to

happen at pivotal historical points when something significant is happening or about to happen. It is not unlike the moments of covenantal renewal we make at pivotal points in our lives like baptism, commitment of membership in a church, ordination to an office in the church, confirmation, even the wedding vows we make in the context of worshipping God. Each time, we again answer Joshua's question, 'Whom will you serve?'

We do this because the truth is that we too are constantly faced with many tempting and competing choices demanding our loyalty. Sometimes the choices are quite enticing – money, greed, power, nationalism, fierce self-determination and cold-hearted selfishness. One does not have to read much of the Bible before one senses just how often its words rub against the demands of the many other gods that vie for our attention and loyalty.

Sometimes we are able to hold fast to our loyalty to God and at other times we fail miserably. Yet, we serve a God of mysterious grace who calls us back again and again so that we might leave the past behind and move into the future with a renewed commitment to the only one who is perfect love. This response of God's grace reminds us that this is not about earning points with God, but it is about finding life's richest meaning in and through our loyalty to God.

Whom will we serve? Much depends on how we answer. This is one of those weighty choices with far reaching consequences.

This past week we have again had to face the news of numerous folks being killed in another horrid shooting rampage this time in Sutherland Springs, Texas. The frequency of these news stories is mind numbing, generating great fear in us and our communities. Nowhere feels safe. We try to have conversations about what to do next, but they always seem to be very limited, unimaginative, and divisively framed. For me, one of my great concerns is that we are becoming a culture in which violence (both verbal and physical) is our go to remedy for settling disputes, disagreements, and quarrels. The more this stuff happens the more prevalent it seems to become. Are you angry? Do you have a disagreement with someone? Do you have a score to settle? Then violence is the way to go.

Even many of the countermeasures we propose to protect ourselves tend to focus almost exclusively on more violence and more hostility. It is an understandable response and I'm not saying I don't feel the draw towards it myself, but I wonder if, ultimately, it really sets us on a path to solving this deep seated and incredibly frightening problem.

Trumping violence with violence is a tempting god to serve, especially when cornered in a place of sensed fear and helplessness. Its draw can easily be seen, I believe, in the grip that violent video games, movies, and a host of other

entertainment genres seem to have on us.

In the midst of this, Joshua's dying words again resound, 'Whom will you serve?' I am convinced that much is at stake in how we respond to this question because if we choose to serve Yahweh, as the Hebrew people did, we also choose to introduce a new voice into this critical conversation we are having. A voice that imaginatively broadens the choices we have. A voice that asks hard questions, that calls each of us to make changes in how we live and how we respond in times of anger and disagreement. A voice that imagines new though risky possibilities. A voice that reminds us that this God who led the Hebrew people out of slavery can also lead us out of the slavery that the cultic god of violence has captured us in.

Now, don't get me wrong. I say this knowing none of this is easy and none of this comes with the promise that it won't be dangerous or difficult but, consider this, is the direction we are heading in now a good one? Is this cultic god of violence serving us well? Whom will you serve?

Perhaps this is again a time when we need to renew our covenant commitment, and, in a way, that is exactly what we will be doing shortly as we hand in our estimated giving cards. It is our way of saying, yes, we believe in this God in Christ. We believe in this God who challenges us to think in new and imaginative ways in response to the world's dangers. We believe in the work we do here – community building, learning how to respond with grace even when our impulse is to lash out, combating society's divisiveness by gathering for worship and covered dish dinners, tending to the poor and forgotten, teaching our children that they are God's beloved and ours too, showing compassion to those who are grieving and in distress, showing mercy in our deeds as much as our words. We believe in this God who is shaping us to be a light of hope in a broken world. Whom will we serve? As for us and our house, we will serve the Christ who chose to respond to the world's violence with a cross shaped by love.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: *And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, we come to you this day with heavy hearts as we are again reminded of the brokenness of your world. Needless and senseless violence has again claimed your precious ones. We search for answers, but come up empty. We want to blame but where does the blame end. We target you and each other with our frustrations and our anger only multiplies the violence with more violence. Gracious God, we need you. Try though we might, the cruelty of these senseless acts seems unending. We are at a loss as to what to do so we search the heavens for answers, for methods, for new things to add to our conversations, and for new ways to respond in our disagreements. In and through the small gifts we offer this day, we reaffirm our deep desire to be your people. In this renewed covenant, make us brave. Enable us to do courageous things that will begin to turn the tide of the violence that consumes our days. Make us a church that refuses to mimic the cultic god of violence that grips your people. Make us a church that holds high the cross of your Son as our answer to life's brutality.

We hold before you this day many thoughts and prayers. We are mindful of those among us in special need especially those on our list of prayer concerns. We pray for those who are sick, weary, grieving, hopeless, and fearful. We pray for those without the means to attain life's most basic necessities. We pray for the angry, the violent, for victims, and for those who victimize. We pray for healing and we pray that that healing will begin with us.

We also pray this day for those whom we now mention in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.