

To Whom Shall We Go?

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Scriptures: Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–25; Psalm 16; Ephesians 5:15–6:9; John 6:60–69

Should we go East or should we go West? When was the last time you had an undirected road trip? Sure, you have probably memorized most of the daily routine trips in your life, and maybe you have even got a map of Knoxville in your head so you can improvise when the inevitable back up comes. But when is the last time you had to make a GPS-free decision about where to go when you weren't sure where you were? If you done so recently, you know that there can be a lot of pressure in that moment, especially when you are on a timetable. Which way are you going to go? Which path will you take?

In our Old Testament reading for today, the people of Israel are presented with a much more important choice than simply which direction they are going to go. Having been settled in the Promised Land for a while (verse one of chapter 23 says a long time had passed and that Joshua was now in his latter years), Joshua gives the people what amounts to his last message as their leader. If you have been in church for a little while, you were probably familiar with the language that comes next even before you heard it this morning. Reminding the people of their pagan past and how God has called them to be his own, Joshua presents a choice. "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."¹

This is a watershed moment, not just for individuals or families, but for the entire nation of Israel. How will they respond to God's faithfulness to them? Will they choose to follow his

¹ Josh 24:15

ways and live into the nation he is forming them to become, the fulfillment of that promise that mission given to Abraham, to be a light unto the nations?

I think it is a sad commentary on where the world is that the most vivid modern parallel I can seem to think of for this situation is the two major party political conventions we have seen in the past six weeks. The excitement, the assumed gravity of the moment and the call to action, these are things we've perhaps seen in clips even if we didn't watch these political displays of power and influence. For those who are bought in, the spirit can be contagious.

Returning to Shechem, that is what the people of Israel are feeling' They are jazzed up and committed. Posed with this supremely important and abundantly clear choice, they make the right call. They choose to follow the Lord. Joshua doesn't seem so sure, but does make a covenant with them, with the people serving as their own witness should they stray from God's ways. This was a moment to tell children and grandchildren about - a true mountain top experience of giving witness to God's special relationship to Israel.

We all may indeed come to moments like this in our lives. Times when it almost seems like a casting director has picked the players, Aaron Sorkin has written the dialogue, and we are called to a choice. It feels like we are the main character in some movie, the only thing missing is a person telling us to stand five feet to the right so that the light hits our face in *just* the right way.

Maybe we've experienced that moment, and maybe we've remained true to our convictions, faithful to Jesus - and thank God for that. If we have not yet had that experience, perhaps it is something we imagine ourselves doing, taking some sort of definitive stand for the Gospel in a public way, perhaps even in a way that is costly to us.

For those of us prone to daydreaming and scenario casting, like me, these thoughts may enter our mind more often than we'd like to admit, certainly more often than we are in reality called to make a choice or stand up for our faith.

I think we also live in a cultural moment that seeks to make us feel that every instance of choice is some grand declaration of where we stand, that every stance we take is of some earth shattering significance and thus needs to be shared with the world. A lighthearted example: You may remember that there have been a few times in the recent past where the news cycle made it seem like whether or not I am willing to eat at Chick-fil-A has some bearing on whether I am a faithful follower of Jesus or not. In fact the truth is much less glamorous - while I do have respect for people who stick to their convictions with grace, I eat at Chick-Fil-A because I like the chicken and it is convenient.

I fear that social media has amplified our natural tendency to turn the everyday molehill of controversy into the mountain we all feel called to die on. Despite the very nature of our non-infinite capacity for having a take on everything, we are constantly bombarded to "take a stand" on any number of issues, ranging from the truly important to the ridiculous. It is in these moments that I believe not having a take, particularly if we are uninformed on a topic can be a good and valuable Christian witness. Saying, "I don't know, I will have to learn and think some more about that," might be one of the best witnesses for the Christian faith you can offer. I fear that far too many of us, myself absolutely included, picture ourselves almost daily as Martin Luther standing against the weight of the powers that be saying, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." To be clear, this is a good and worthy conclusion to come to in the proper moment, but not every moment is equivalent to the people choosing who they will serve at Shechem.

Here is the sad truth, grand gestures in big moments mean nothing when they are not followed up by daily, boring, and routine faithfulness. The tragedy of Joshua's great call to faithfulness is that the people could not live up to what they had promised after he died. You only need to turn one page from the end of Joshua and into the book of Judges to see what becomes of this grand expression of obedience. Remember that refrain repeated throughout Judges: "The people did what was right in their own eyes." That is what happens when we think about our faith in terms of big moments only and neglect our daily need for repentance and obedience. It doesn't take much study of the book of Judges to see the catastrophic consequences of a people forgetting their commitment to God and doing what is right in their own eyes. Violence. Destruction. Both are on full display throughout the time of the judges. The grand commitment at Shechem with Joshua is but a distant memory, and the cost of that forgetting is high.

So let's turn from a large crowd to a small one, from a grand gesture of faith to a single voice with nowhere else to turn. You could say the situation of our Gospel reading is a bit of an inverse of the story of the people and Joshua, we have 12 men present instead of a 12 gathered tribes in the thousands. There were thousands around Jesus at the beginning of this chapter, of course, when he had fed the five thousand. But we've had a sea crossing since then, and even though the crowd followed him through that, the things he said on the other side of the Sea of Galilee started to turn people off, and it probably didn't help matters that he wasn't giving them any more food. The awkward talk crescendoed to last week's message that those who would partake of his life must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Perhaps you have been at a dinner party that was going just fine until that certain person started talking. The tension in the room rises and everyone starts to fidget in their chair. Pretty soon, it is time for you to leave. This is the sort of situation we have with Jesus' words in John 6. There is an ever increasing offense to these words, so much so that even some who had been his disciples turned away from him at this time.

And then, the crowd that was once 5000 happy and fed people is reduced to 12. The big moment has become very small, lonely even. But this moment is full of faith. The twelve remain and they are locked in. Peter speaks for them, and for us in our best moments. When Jesus asks them if they too will leave him, what does Peter say? "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."² "To whom shall we go?" There is desperation in those words of course, but it is faithful desperation. It is the wisdom of knowing that there is no other place we can turn with all of our stuff. It is the sound of putting all our cares on Jesus; we have nowhere else to turn. Peter had lived enough life with Jesus to have faith in him. That trust, that faith is built in the small moments of day to day life, not in giant stadiums or in front of big crowds.

It is a more fun story to tell about ourselves that we are the courageous hero clinging to what we know to be right. It is more accurate to say we, who were once blind, now can see and cling to the only one who can get us through. "Choose this day whom you will serve," is not just a choice on one very public and important day, it's the question we face every morning the Lord wakes us up.

The daily dependence of following Jesus prepares us for those hero moments. We don't want to spend all of our time imagining a Joshua moment and miss the calling of the Spirit into the way of Jesus in the daily and mundane.

As I was considering that grand invitation at the end of the book of Joshua, it struck me that grounding the decision in the home "Me and my house" conjures up images of daily

² John 6:68b-69

domestic life. Surely a choice of serving God would be reflected in the home life of that house.

This draws me to a convicting question - if a stranger were to come live in my house for a week, what would they know about my faith? Would they know more about the television that I watch or my political opinions than what I think about the God of the universe or what I believe about the good news of Jesus? Would they gather that I am a Christian at all?

I am convinced that the small daily obedience of following Jesus in the little things not only prepares us to be faithful in the big moments, but attaches us to him for the long haul. You don't wake up one day and decide to run a marathon.

Some of you may remember the Snowpocalypse that hit the Atlanta area in 2014. It was fun for the nation to look and laugh at my fellow Georgians as they skid and slid across icy interstates and got stuck, in many cases overnight, in their cars due to a lack of infrastructure preparedness and organization. And there are some great stories that came out of it - notably for me how one Atlanta Braves legend, Chipper Jones, came to rescue another, Freddie Freeman from where he was stuck on the interstate by driving his four-wheeler to Freddie's stranded car. They even made a bobblehead out of it to hand out at a Braves game a few years later.

But the Snowpocalypse was not a laughing matter for my family. You see my Mom and Dad had the sense to stay home that day, it's just that they could not do so. In January of 2014, my Dad was in the final stages of treatment for cancer. It was the month that he had a complete regrowing of his bone marrow from his own stem cells, a full restart of his immune system. Dad had an important check in with his doctor that day, and so there they

were, out among the chaos. I shuddered at the thought of my sick Dad and my Mom having to spend the frigid night in their car, stuck, with no way to help them. But this did not happen. You see, Dad grew up in the area around the hospital where he was receiving treatment, and he knew every back road like the back of his hand. While the masses were getting stuck on the interstate, my parents were carefully and deftly navigating their way back to their warm home with a knowledge that had been built up over decades of experience. Dad was ready for the Snowpocalypse because he had done the daily boring work of living, working, and playing on the very streets that got him home.

In order to be ready for the big moments, we have to be formed by the small ones. Jesus asks us to follow him daily. When we have eyes to see, there is never another place we can go to receive what he offers. May we all see that, today and every day.