

CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU SHALL SERVE

a sermon based on Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

Ephesians 6:10-20

by the Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Hanning

First Congregational United Protestant Church

10 Hemlock, Park Forest, IL 60466

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When Joshua, in his farewell speech to the tribes of Israel, challenged them to decide which God they would worship, it wasn't as if they didn't have any choices. When he said they might choose to worship the gods their ancestors served in the region beyond the River, he was referring to the gods that Abraham's parents and grandparents and great-grand parents worshiped. And when he said that they might prefer to worship the gods of the Amorites in whose land they were living, he was referring to the pagan idols which the people of Canaan worshiped.

There is a story about British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith who was invited to spend a weekend at the Waddesdon estate of the 19th-century Rothschild family. He accepted and shortly after he arrived the butler announced that tea was being served in the solarium. Asquith went directly to the solarium where he was greeted by his host and his family and they all sat down to tea. The butler approached and the following conversation ensued:

"Tea, coffee, or a peach from off the wall, sir?"

"Tea, please," answered Asquith.

"China, India, or Ceylon, sir?" asked the butler.

"China, please."

"Lemon, milk, or cream, sir?"

"Milk, please," replied Asquith.

"Jersey, Hereford, or Shorthorn, sir?" asked the butler.

Some of the choices we make are of little consequence. Others are of great consequence.

The choice that Joshua put before the Hebrew tribes was clearly of great consequence. Joshua wanted to ensure that, after his death, the people would choose to worship the God who had sent Moses to lead them out of Egyptian slavery. This is the same God, Joshua reminded them, who had watched over them as they made their way through the wilderness for 40 years. This is also the same God who had brought them into the Promised Land where they had become permanent residents. This is, Joshua reminded them, the one and only true God of the Hebrews.

But the central point that Joshua made was this: "Now if you are unwilling to serve

the LORD, **choose** this day whom you **will** serve.”

*“If you are unwilling to serve the LORD, **choose** this day whom you **will** serve.”*

It was not a forgone conclusion that they would reject the gods of their ancestors. It was not a forgone conclusion that they would reject the gods of the Amorites. It was not a forgone conclusion that they would choose to worship the God who had rescued them from slavery and guided them through the wilderness and brought them into the Promised Land.

But it was a choice they would be required to make and it would define the next choices they made. The words of Eleanor Roosevelt ring true: “One's philosophy is **not** best expressed in words. It is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.”

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul urged the followers of Jesus to “put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

Now, some people will say, who is the devil? What is the devil? Some say that the devil has a kind of human form and thinks like a human in order to be able to lure people into sin. Others maintain that the devil is more a *symbol* of evil. This is a debate that could use up all our time but get us nowhere. Whatever our opinion is on who or what the devil is, we have all known the power of temptation in our lives. It can be so strong that we can almost feel it. There are times when evil has taken possession of human beings who oppress and torture and murder others. Hitler comes to mind. Stalin is another who would seem to fit in that category. The deposed dictator of Liberia, Taylor is another.

Paul said, “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness.” Paul points beyond individual tyrants and dictators, even though they are evil enough. He is saying that each of us is vulnerable to the lure of evil. Temptation is the bait and our own personal obsessions are the ones holding the fishing pole.

Paul tells us that to resist the powers of evil, we should put on the whole armor of God by fastening the belt of truth around our waist. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” When we choose to worship God, we choose to live by the truth, no matter how difficult or dangerous that may be.

In order to deal with evil, Paul tells us to put on the breastplate of righteousness. A breastplate is a like a bullet-proof vest only this breastplate is made out of our devotion to the will of God.

He says we should wear the kind of shoes that will make us ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace. What kind of shoes would that be? Now, I've got foot problems and if my shoes aren't comfortable, there's no way I can be at peace. If your feet hurt, it's hard to think about anything else. So, you have to choose your shoes to fit. Shoes that help us to proclaim the Gospel of peace will need a stable and solid sole that will wear well on a rough and rocky path. So, how's your soul? Is it stable and solid enough to get through rough and rocky terrain? One way to tell is to check and see how you react to stressful situations. I have a story.

The other day, a situation arose at the office that got my dander up. I raised my voice as I said something rather un-preacherly. Ornita, who was working on the membership rolls and our new Office Administrator, Linda Vincent both looked over at me in surprise. Instantly, I felt badly but as the saying goes, "Once a thing is said out loud, you can't take it back." It would seem that my shoes weren't prepared to proclaim the Gospel of peace.

Paul continues with his description of the "whole armor of God." And "with all of these, take the shield of faith," says Paul, and we should be able to quench **all** the flaming arrows of the evil one. In another context, Paul said that *No temptation has overtaken us that is not common to everyone else. But God is faithful and He will not let us be tempted beyond our strength, so that when temptation comes, God will provide us with a way out so that we will be able to endure it.* [I Cor.10:13] If, through faith, we hope for the strength and courage to face and overcome temptation, God will provide what we need.

Then, Paul says, take the helmet of salvation. By serving and healing others, Jesus showed us the way of salvation. By offering our lives in service to others, we are wearing the helmet of salvation.

And the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, is not limited to the Bible even though it is commonly referred to as the Word of God. The Word of God is the will of God as it is revealed in our life experiences and the lives of other believers as well as the testimony of the Bible.

But before we can put on this whole armor of God, we must choose God rather than all the other gods competing for our allegiance. Considering the culture of materialism and personal pleasure that we live in, we can be easily distracted by the many gods that surround us. Furthermore, God has become one option among many. There are churches that claim to have a corner on God's truth, setting themselves apart as the only true believers. At the same time, in other circles, faith has been reduced to an undefined kind of feel-good spirituality. I have a story.

Some years ago, a mid-western college offered a “final lecture” series in which the faculty were asked to share what they might say if they were to deliver their final lecture. The series was immensely popular and when each ‘final lecture’ was delivered, people from the campus and the community filled the large lecture hall. On the night the professor of higher math was scheduled to give his “final lecture” people were wondering what he might say. When he came on stage, the room fell silent. He looked out at his audience and began, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to have this opportunity to speak about something that has been a major concern most of my adult life. Most mathematicians believe that one can find the answer to any question through math if one has the correct formula. Much of what we know about our world and the universe around us has come to us or has been better understood through mathematical computation. Consider how the computer has revolutionized our lives, exponentially expanding our knowledge base even as I speak to you this evening. So, as I pondered what I, a mathematician, might say that is most important to me, I concluded that there was only one thing.” He paused and the audience waited in anticipation. “The one thing I have to share is this. No matter how closely we are able to simulate the human brain and even if we are able to create life out of inorganic substances, we shall never truly be able to explain the origin of life or fully understand the emotion we call love because both come from a source that is beyond our comprehension. Whenever I think about the joy that my wife and children have given me, I am more and more convinced that there is something beyond mathematics to explain that which is inexplicable. And, as unscholarly as it may seem to some, and as politically incorrect it may seem to others, I have come to believe that the source of life and the capacity to love comes from a higher power whom I choose to call God. Thank you for your kind attention.” The audience was stunned. They sat in silence for a few seconds and then one person started clapping his hands, and another, and another until the entire audience was on its feet and applauding.

And this is the challenge offered to us today. Choose this day whom you shall serve. Will we rise to the occasion and choose to worship God or will we give our allegiance to the lesser gods around us, the gods who promise everything but give us nothing of real value? The choice is ours.

Oh, and if we feel we are not strong enough to make the choice, consider this promise. Whom God calls, God also equips.” So, if you’re afraid or overwhelmed, God will provide you with all you need to face any challenge. And let the people say, “Amen.”