

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – August 26, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Choose For Yourselves This Day Whom You Will Serve

Joshua 24:1,2,14-18 (NIV)

*Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. 2) Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. ... 14) "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15) But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then **choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. **But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.**" 16) **Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! 17) It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. 18) And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."***

Dear friends in Christ,

We have not been summoned to Shechem by Joshua, but we have gathered together as God's people in his presence. The events of our text took place near the end of Joshua's service to the Lord. You may recall that Joshua was the Lord's servant who had led the Lord's people in their conquest of the Land of Promise following their 40 years of wondering in the wilderness after the Lord had delivered them from their slavery in Egypt.

Shechem is not as well known to us as places like Jerusalem – but it played a prominent role in the history of God's Old Testament people. It was at Shechem that the Lord promised Abraham that his descendants would one day inhabit the land of Canaan. The patriarch Jacob purified his household from idols at Shechem. (Cf. Genesis 35:2-4) In the early days of their conquest of the land of Canaan, Joshua had assembled God's people at Shechem and reaffirmed for them the promises that the Lord had given to his people. Now that the conquest of the land was complete and Joshua's time of service to the Lord was drawing to a close, Shechem provide an appropriate location for God's people to reflect on God's faithfulness to his promises to them and to reaffirm their desire to be faithful to the promises they had made to him.

Our Scripture text for today will provide us with an opportunity to reflect on the promises the Lord has made to us and to recommit ourselves to keeping promises we have made to him as we join the Israelites who gathered at Shechem in saying:

Theme: We will serve the LORD, because he is our God.

1. The Lord has been faithful to his promises to us
2. We strive to be faithful to our promises to him

After Joshua had had summoned the leaders of the people of Israel to present themselves before God at Shechem, the Lord spoke to his people through Joshua and reminded them of his faithfulness to them: **'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. (3) But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, (4) and to Isaac I gave Jacob**

and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt. (5) " 'Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. (6) When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. (7) But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time. (8) " 'I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. ... 'Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. ... (13) So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'

The Lord's grace is evident throughout these words. He is the one who took the initiative in calling Abraham to be the "father" of this nation. He is the one who gave them Moses and Aaron to deliver them from their nation from slavery in Egypt and who ultimately delivered to them the cities and fields where they were now living. This was all evidence of the Lord's goodness to them – they were God's people because of his grace to them. After reminding the people of God's grace to them, Joshua continued.

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15)

Fear and faithful service was the appropriate response to God's faithfulness to his people. Joshua called upon the people to stand in awe of God's love for them and to serve him. Both their attitudes and their actions were to indicate their response to the Lord's love which he showed them by the promises which he made and kept for them.

This service was to be a loving response to the Lord's grace to them and it was to be an exclusive service. That's why Joshua reminded the people to rid themselves of the gods of their ancestors and the god's of people who previously lived in the land where they were now dwelling. The Lord God was the one who had chosen them as his own and blessed them. He would not share his glory with another.

Joshua was well aware of the fact that the nation of Israel had a long history of failing to give exclusive honor to the Lord. Frequently they had abandoned the Lord and turned away to idols. At times they tried to engage in a blended style of worship – by not totally setting aside their idols. Therefore Joshua was urging them to "Put away their idols once and for all – because by God's grace they were his chosen people.

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

This assembly the leaders of the people provided them with an opportunity to re-affirm their commitment to the Lord. The heading in our Bibles describes this event as a "Covenant Renewal." As the leader of God's people, Joshua had set an example of faithful service to the Lord. From his younger days as a spy sent to check out the land of Canaan, to the time he spent as Moses faithful aide and during the time he coordinated the conquest of the land of Canaan as Israel's general in chief, Joshua had shown awe and faithful service to the Lord. It was his desire to lead his household down that same path in the future. It was his prayer that the nation of people whom the Lord had chosen and whom he had led would make that same choice and commitment.

So far, our focus has been on the background, context, and history of the verses from the 24th chapter of Joshua. As we have reflected on the promises that the Lord made and kept for his chosen people of Israel, it's important for us to realize that those promises were related to promises that affect our lives too. Whenever we reflect on the promises the Lord kept for Abraham and the nation of Israel, we need to bear in mind that God had promised that all nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's offspring – the offspring of Abraham who brings us blessings is our Lord and Savior Jesus. Old Testament history is reminder of the faithfulness God has shown us by keeping his promises to send the world a Savior from sin.

As I mentioned earlier we, like the people at Shechem, are gathered in the Lord's presence. He has been faithful to us all of his promises to us. He has sent Jesus as the offspring of Abraham to be a blessing for us. In love, the Lord God has chosen and called us to be his own by calling us to faith in his Son, Jesus, as our Savior. He's washed away our sins with the waters of baptism and brought us into his family. He has lovingly provided us with spiritual and physical blessings more numerous than we can count.

At one time or another the majority of those who are worshipping with us today at Good Shepherd have been blessed to make a thorough study of God's gracious promises to them and dealings with them as a part of your confirmation class instructions. On the day of your confirmation, you stood before the Lord and made a choice, if you will, to be faithful -- to serve the Lord. After making a confession of your faith in the Triune God and affirming that you believed that the truths you had been taught in your confirmation classes reflected the truths of Scripture you promised to with the help and by the grace of God to stand firm in the confession of those truths. And finally, you expressed your intention to faithfully live your live according to the Word of God, to faithfully use the Means of Grace, to walk as a child of God and to remain true to the Triune God all the days of your life with the help and by the grace of God. (cf. The Confirmation Vow)

Just as the nation of Israel periodically renewed its commitment to the Lord in light of the promises, he made and kept for them; so the promises that the Lord has made to us and kept for us should inspire us to renew our commitment to him. We strive to keep our promises to him as our expression of awe and thanksgiving for all that he has done for us.

At Shechem, the people of God were reminded of the promises that the Lord had made and kept for them. In response to his grace, they affirmed their desire to serve the Lord because he was their God. Joshua had placed a choice before the people telling them that if it seemed evil to them to serve the Lord that they should chose whom they would serve. The people enthusiastically expressed their commitment to the Lord, their God by saying: **"Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!**

The people at Shechen had been given the opportunity to take a careful look at all that God had done for them. Joshua had encouraged them to carefully think through the Lord's actions and the implications for their life. Then he reminded them not to put off their response to the Lord's faithfulness, **"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."** The people responded. When they contemplated everything the Lord had done for them the choice was obvious. **17) It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. 18) And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."**

The choice had been made. Now they faced the challenge of putting their decision into practice in their daily lives. And that's the challenge that we face as well. The nation of Israel was often tempted to try to compromise their service to the Lord by following the sinful ideas and lifestyles of their heathen neighbors. You and I also are influenced by the society and the culture in which we live. At times we end up putting our

relationship with the Lord and our service to him on hold as we get caught up in following after choices which are in conflict with our desire to serve the Lord. As we spend our lives, spend our money, use our talents, we are choosing whom we serve. Every act reflects who our God or god really is. Although there may be many gods, essentially the choice comes down to serving the Lord or serving the devil.

We humbly confess that we have not always loved the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul as we have promised to do. We rejoice that in spite of our unfaithfulness, the Lord our God has remained faithful to us and kept all the promises he has made to us. In thanksgiving for the Lord's grace and forgiveness, may we joy with Israel of old in saying: **"We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."** Amen.