

### Joshua 24:14-25 (New Revised Standard)

**14**"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.**15**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."**16**Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods;**17**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;**18**and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."**19**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.**20**If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good."**21**And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!"**22**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."**23**He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."**24**The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey."**25**So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

The story this week may sound familiar for a number of reasons. Last week we read the version told in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy resembles the result of a story that has been through the spin doctors of a priestly caste and had all components of its message aligned to the liking of the politicians in the office of the King/Prime Minister/Premier.

The version in Joshua comes out of the folk tale tradition and appeals to me because it feels more authentic to who we are and where we are.

The setting is this - The people of Israel have come through a long, hard period – 40 years is the Biblical code, as opposed to our 17 years of wilderness wandering. And now the Promised Land. They can see and taste the bounty of that new land which has been developed by the great technological and trading power of the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Jebusites. And they are straining at the bit for some of that life.

I don't know if you have ever lived on the edge of such bounty and comfort in your life but it is powerful stuff.

I grew up in a relatively small place about 12-15 miles from the American border. And almost every year, our family would spend one of the two paid weeks of vacation my Dad received setting up camp outside of Spokane Washington. I have vivid memories of a couple of those holidays.

When you came in from the north, on Division or #2, there were acres and acres of car lots, all different kinds and colours. And there used to be a drive-in, where you could get 10 hamburgers in a bag for a dollar. And across the street, they had stores all side by side, with a roof over them where, no matter if it was raining or not, you could just walk inside without a jacket. Northtown. And there was a big store there where my Dad bought me my own transistor radio, with two batteries – one for spare, with a little white earphone, with a curly cord so that I could lay in the tent at night and listen to music. And when you turned the dial there was more than one station, lots more, maybe 4, 5. And then on those days

when my Mom wanted to go downtown to the huge six floor department stores my Dad would take me to a place where you could buy second hand comic books. We could never afford new comic books at home but here my Dad got me a whole box – Lone Ranger, Ringo, Have Gun will Travel, Davy Crockett, Batman, Superman, Green Lantern - all the high calibre literature. That box would last a whole year and I could even trade some of the lamer ones like Archie to my friends. And always there would be the speech by my mother – “Now don’t you wander off. Don’t ride the escalators without your Dad or me. Don’t go in the elevators. Don’t touch things. Don’t take anything from strangers. And don’t stare at people.” And I would say, “OK Mom, can we go now?” And she would respond, “In a minute, are you listening to me?”

Overlooking a land of abundance, a land the poets describe as flowing with milk and honey, Joshua says to the people, Choose this day whom you will follow? And they say, NO problem, the Lord our God, the one who has brought us up out of the land of Egypt, can we go now? And Joshua says, “are you listening to me? The power of what you see there and what is associated with them is far more powerful and insidious than you imagine?”

Even now, when I am tired and needing a break, I instinctively want to turn the car south. I know there are no longer 10 burgers for a dollar – although I can say the word “buffet”. “And Gaye look, outlet mall!” Surely there’s a box of comics in there. “C’mon, there might be something there for the grandkids or a shoe store.”

And the people said to Joshua, No problem Joshua. And Joshua replied, you know the God who has been with you through the hard times and the things that sustain and bring you life but sometimes not so easy to keep the main thing the main thing.

The matter of resisting foreign gods can be slippery.

Functionally speaking, think for a moment about what gods provide? Whether they be idols or ideologies gods are most often trusted either to bring us blessing or safety. There are probably other things but at least these two.

Define them broadly; blessing can include prosperity, abundance, fertility (in some cultures), wealth, health, happiness and safety can include comfort, reassurance, protection. If we then ask ourselves what we really trust to bring us these things, you get a whiff of why it this matter of choosing to trust the God we know through Jesus Christ can be both a subtle and a slippery enterprise.

Just as true for congregations as for us as individuals.

It is not difficult to come up with a list of likely suspects that congregations are tempted to trust ultimately. Some even tempt us.

Tradition – Some congregations chorus “we’ve never done it that way! That’s not the right way to do church.” This used to be easy to throw stones at until I realized that, personally, I really like my stuff to be where it is supposed to be and to do things the way I usually do them, which is the right way.

Personalities – many congregations labour under the illusion that if we just get a “real minister” in here there wouldn’t be a problem. On the personal side, I suppose the temptation more resembles the engine that drives the billion dollar self-help industry, “If only I could just look like, be like, have one of those... then my life would be blessed.”

Finances - we are well aware of how the rightful concern to be faithful stewards of our money can slip into a concern where money rules. When I was touring the country with Emerging Spirit, I had just finished some presentation for a gathering of congregational teams. And a man came up to me very excited, with news he just had to share. Fundraising for endowments in their congregation had just passed the point where, he said with great pride, “even if we have no more people, we can still afford our building and a minister.” And Peter Drucker’s phrase popped in mind, “And what business are you in?” One day Gaye came home after visiting with one of her oldest friends. Uncharacteristically Gaye was a little down in the mouth. Why? Nothing. Why. Her friend had told her over lunch that she was distressed because she thought she and her husband would fall a bit short of the 2 million in investments they absolutely needed to retire. We’re in the wrong business for that Gaye. I know ....

Or how about programs. Many congregations have their own version of that old bumper sticker – those who die with the most toys win. Those who have the most programs win. Or individually, those who can cram the most experiences, trips, adventures win.

What else? Any other idols on the shelf promising blessing and safety?

For congregations – buildings! We know the subtleties of this. How easily we slip from being grateful to being able to worship in a beautiful space and use it creatively to focus on the building itself. This year we have had about \$83,000 worth of unbudgeted expenses related to the building. As I look at the financial statements, I wonder where we are on that spiritually. My Dad always used to yell at us when we were kids – don’t touch my tools But aren’t they for working Dad? On a personal level I guess the obvious parallel would be just things. For certainly the most powerful message or ideology of the past few decades has been that more is better, more will make you happy, more will ease the pain.

There are, of course, many other “foreign gods” that siren their message to us and that touch us as individuals and as a congregation. And if you are tweeting during this sermon that might be a line to follow.

| Congregations               | Personal              |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Tradition                   | Comfort & convenience |
| (Charismatic) personalities | “If only ....”        |
| Finances                    | Finances              |
| Programs                    | Experiences           |
| Buildings                   | More                  |

Choose this day whom you will serve, says Joshua. Put away your foreign gods.

Choose, says Joshua. Choose.

And sometimes it is just that simple, is it not? As a trained professional and a husband I am capable of fogging this question up pretty well – “Well might that not seem just a tad harsh Joshua, a little bit exclusionary, a little too much black and white in a pluralistic, postmodern world.” But sometimes life just comes down to it, doesn’t it?

What kind of person are we going to be? How are you going to carry yourself through this situation? How are we going to be through this time of trial?

Do you really trust that our life and the world will only be right once everything is done our way, under our control? Will we only trust that we are loved and worthy of love if everybody likes us or we constantly receive affirmation or praise? Will the only role we allow yourself to play in a relationship is that of saviour, the one who can make it alright, the one who will take care of everything?

Choose, says Joshua. What kind of people do you really want to be? What do you want to trust? Push comes to shove.

Early one morning I was sitting in my chair – “you kids get out of my chair, I’m working on a sermon about not being bound by custom and comfort!” Anyway, I got to wondering about who we are really? Who are we called to be?

For a congregation the greatest sin is not a sin of commission or omission, to use Roman Catholic categories, but of no mission. So what are we about for we are surely about something.

This matter of mission, of what business we’re really in, is a live question for me. People now ask me, “Well, how are you doing at Oak Bay?” And if I’m short on time or patience I may just skate through the question with a “Good, living the dream!” But if friends press I say “I think I’m still trying to figure out what the job is?” Oh, not the job description type of job, but the real work, the hard, specific work of what it means for us to choose God and my role in that mission. I know it takes time but I am listening.

The framework of our mission is becoming clearer and we can talk about that.

Some congregations in the Christian family answer the mission question by saying they are about saving the lost or about bringing Jesus to the lost. That is not our first language nor does it seem to be our compelling call. The current mission in vogue within the United Church is that congregations should be in the business of making disciples of Jesus. And, in some circles, you can garner lots of affirmation by saying the congregation has moved to a disciple-making model. Now there is little doubt that we are up front and intentional about declaring ourselves to be a people and a place where people are formed and re-formed but I wonder about the *making* disciples part. Is that our core? (Although Gaye argues that this the focus of her work in Christian education and with the children.)

Part of the answer lies in a very basic choice we have made about how we see the world and God in the world. This did not start with me or with Gaye; I think it has a long history in the story of the congregation.

It does not feel that we see ourselves, necessarily as bringing Christ to the world as if Jesus was our possession or commodity. Rather our very deep sense is that God – and this is my language – is already

at loose in here and out there. So much of our effort is, quite simply, to pay attention to the presence and work of God among us and out there and to lend a hand.

A lot of our staff time goes into all the things surrounding worship. And while we strive for excellence in every component of our worship we are not about performance. Nor do I get the sense that you just come to be entertained. It is about something more; it is about having the discipline and the intention to put ourselves into the place when we realize again that really we do want to choose the God we know through Jesus, who has brought us out of the Land of Egypt, and not the foreign gods. We really do need and want to have it etched in the innermost part of our souls, like a laser etching on a diamond, that we are beloved (in spite of our moods, etc), that we are forgiven (in spite of our secret dossier) and that there is hope (for ourselves, our children, grandchildren, friends and world). This time is not about manufacturing anything but about uncovering something, opening ourselves to something already present. I feel that's true.

The emphasis we place upon hospitality. Now it may be that this language has risen in visibility during the past couple of years because we hammer the theme incessantly but it is not as if the deep currents of the story of hospitality are foreign to you. The practice that we have begun of having someone from the congregation co-lead the opening prayer in another language is all about recognition that, already, we are a gaggle of people with quite different stories who have somehow found this a hospitable place. And that is somehow close to the core of our story and who we are. In part, it is why we delight in Gordon's gift of always inviting people. It is not so much to add numbers to the choir or the church but really it is just reminds us of the melody that already hums in our depth. (Numbers – I should have mentioned that false god but we talk now of framework.)

IN Pastoral care, as done mostly by you, we do not care for one another in a way that says "Oh, we'll send someone over who has the right word, a magic prayer, and it will be all better." We are more the walk alongside kind of crew, providing a shoulder when needed, with an eye out for a cup of water, a loaf of bread, a new sofa or lamp, that kind of thing. We are the media through which God is present.

All the ways we engage the world – see the Serving the World pamphlet – are but ways to encounter and engage the God already at work there.

The people of Israel stood on the brink of a new time. So too do we. And always at such times, whether they be of retirement, of graduation, marriage, puberty, a new chapter in ministry, whatever, we face some version of the question of what we will trust to carry us through this time and what kind of people we shall be during this time.

As a people have we been given this place to help our choosing and our living, so that it may indeed become a sanctuary of discovery where we discover God and ourselves, where hearts are changed and made anew and where we, as a congregation, choose to be a platform for God's agents to be loose in the world.

Deep in the story of our soul we know that we have been dependent upon God's grace for our journey and that, even now facing a changing world, God's hand reaches out for us and that, at our best, a part of us feels secure, even unafraid, because we choose to trust the word that came to the people long ago,

"You shall be my people and I will be your God."