

"Serve The Lord"

Joshua 24

Children's Sermon

Last week I shared with you the story of the Israelites and how God set them free from slavery and how they escaped the Egyptians, and how God blew back the waters of the Red Sea to make it possible for the Israelites to cross on dry land, but that when the Egyptians tried to cross, the walls of water collapsed on them and the people were free!

And I shared with you the story of how God gave the people food in the desert, like bread, quail and water. And that God provided for them all their needs even though the people complained.

And this is how the Israelite people lived for many years. They wandered around in the desert until it was time to go home.

And it reminded me of a dove ceremony that I have seen from time to time. Have you ever been to a dove ceremony?

Around here they have this ceremony during a funeral to remind people of a person going to heaven.

And what they do is take a real dove and they release it to fly. And if everything goes right, the bird will fly around a few times and then, when they know where they are, they will start heading for home. The dove, believe it or not, always find their way home.

They don't stop to ask for directions, or stop to get something to eat. They go home. Well, you know I heard about one dove ceremony when they released the dove and it flew up into the air and then landed on a car in the parking lot. I saw another one land on a roof and just stay there for a while. I don't know if those birds got home or not. I'd like to think they did.

That's what the Israelites were like. Like that dove that flies around and then perches on a car or a roof, the Bible tells us that the Israelites wandered around in the desert for many years before finally being given permission to go into The Promised Land. They had to do this because when they were given the opportunity to go home, they allowed their fear to control them. So, they were told they had to wander like a circling dove, sitting occasionally here and there, and then flying once again.

Sometimes we can be like the Israelites. We look at a big project, or we face something that seems hard or challenging and we feel afraid, and so we just wander, or we waste time, or we say, "I don't want to do this!" We don't want to try to eat a new food, or go someplace new with our family, or do a responsibility or a chore at home. And if we refuse to do this, we keep ourselves from experiencing new things that will help us grow stronger and wiser. Many times, God doesn't want us to wander and waste time; God wants us to face our challenges and do the right thing.

Let's pray...

Sermon

When I was in middle school and high school, I loved clothes shopping. I hate it today. Today, I would say that I am a typical male who marches into the store and grabs the right size and heads out without trying it on: I've got better, more pressing stuff to do.

But when I was teenager, shopping was like panning for gold, or searching for lost city of El Dorado. Finding the right pair of jeans or shoes was like finding a priceless treasure that required hours of meticulous searching and comparing.

Eventually, my father refused to take me shopping. My mother, bless her, knew that an entire day must be

devoted to my shopping expeditions. And after searching in every mall store including Spencer's, my mother would turn to me and say, "David, I don't think they've invented the kind of clothes you're looking for."

The moment of truth had arrived: I had to make a decision.

As I said earlier, the people of Israel had been wandering in the desert for many years. After they escaped Pharaoh and the Egyptian army at The Red Sea, the Israelites took a long circuitous route around the wilderness until they reached the doorstep of their homeland, Canaan, "a land flowing with milk and honey," The Promised Land.

But they found that land was occupied by the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hitites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And while they could see that the land was plentiful and everything they hoped it would be, they also noticed that the men were large and hearty - "giants" some would say.

So, the Israelites lost hope and withered at the prospect of fighting the inhabitants of the land; everyone except for two men, named Caleb and Joshua. The latter would become the heir to Moses. After the Israelites wandered like a dove figuring out its bearings before finally deciding to fly

home, after a generation had passed away, Joshua would lead the people across the Jordan River and into The Promised Land.

And the sixth book of the Bible, Joshua, chronicles the Israelite conquest of The Promised Land. It is not a particularly fun book to read. Battle after brutal battle is fought. Countless lives are lost as the new nation of Israel led by God to carve out a place in Ancient Palestine.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this, but I do want to mention that if you read through Joshua and Judges, it's okay to be disturbed and troubled as you read through these accounts. And it's okay if you are appalled at the role God plays in this as well.

This was a particularly brutal time in history, and I'm glad I didn't live during this era. God, did not create violence, but God did figure out a way to accomplish God's purposes and God's will in a violent world. Sometimes God used peaceful means to accomplish this, and sometimes they were violent. I do not excuse what we read in the book of Joshua, and I will not soften what you read. It is what it is. I read it, I grimace, and I look forward to Jesus who shows us a different way. In fact, some would say that Jesus is the New Testament's answer to Joshua. His name, after all means the same thing and Joshua's

name, "God saves." Jesus is the answer, the better way to the violence of Joshua.

Anyway, Joshua conquers the land of Canaan, destroying pagan cultures along the way including their idols which the Israelites are forbidden to worship.

And so, towards the end of the book, in the final chapter, Joshua pulls his people together. The land has been cleared out and it's time for the people to settle down in this land. But before they get too comfortable, before they start planting fields of grain, building cities, or claiming property for their flocks, Joshua makes sure the people remember their priorities. Joshua reminds the people that God is the reason they are here in The Promised Land. God was the one who had fought for them and had delivered them from the Egyptians and their other enemies.

God, who had been worshipped by their ancestors, Abram, Isaac and Jacob, was the one who had brought them victory. It was not because of their prowess on the field of battle or because they had conceived of a brilliant strategy. God was the victor, and it was essential that the people remember this.

Joshua, therefore, called for their loyalty to God and encouraged the people to make a choice: they had

been exposed to numerous cultures and religions, temples and idols - they had been on an epic shopping trip around The Promised Land. Now, it was time to make a decision. So, Joshua tells them this:

14 "So have respect for the Lord. Serve him. Be completely faithful to him. Throw away the gods your people worshiped east of the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord. 15 But suppose you don't want to serve him. Then choose for yourselves right now whom you will serve. You can choose the gods your people served east of the Euphrates River. Or you can serve the gods of the Amorites. After all, you are living in their land. But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord."

16 Then the people answered Joshua, "We would never desert the Lord! We would never serve other gods! 17 The Lord our God himself brought us and our parents up out of Egypt. He brought us out of that land where we were slaves. With our own eyes, we saw those great signs he did. He kept us safe on our entire journey. He kept us safe as we traveled through all the nations. 18 He drove them out to make room for us. That included the Amorites. They also lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord. That's because he is our God."

When I read this story of Joshua bringing the people together for a

final speech, I think about what my mom said to me after we had searched every clothing store in the mall: It's time to make a decision. Except it's not a clothing choice that the people are trying to make here. No, Joshua tells the people: it's time to consider the choose who you are going to serve.

But suppose you don't want to serve him. Then choose for yourselves right now whom you will serve. You can choose the gods your people served east of the Euphrates River. Or you can serve the gods of the Amorites. After all, you are living in their land. But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord. (24:15)

Now, some of you may read this and see this decision as a simple religious decision. Like, are we going to be Catholic or Lutheran, Jewish or Buddhist, Baptist or Ba'hai. But along with that decision, comes more than a belief structure. The one they choose to serve here, will determine kind of beliefs that will shape the culture they will be.

The people of Israel have been busy, moving from one city to another, battling various tribes and nations, eradicating the inhabitants throughout the land. The people are busy conquering and achieving, making sure that they effectively prepare the land for themselves to enjoy and call their own. But you see, that Joshua

and the Israelite people have been busy doing more than simply battling. They have been busy establishing a culture whose foundation is God who is distinct and different from the other gods worshipped in the Canaanite religions.

Throughout this sermon series, “Back In Busyness,” I have not told you to stop being busy, rather, I have said that many of us will go on living active full lives and many of us wouldn’t have it any other way. For many of us, life will continue to be full. And it will continue to be this way because of the culture that we have created. It’s a culture that values experiences, productivity, hard work, advancement, achievement, and achievements.

But just like Joshua encouraged the people to consider the culture they were choosing, so do we need to examine our own culture and the lives we create within our culture. We need to step back, like Joshua and ask, “What am I doing? How am I living? What am I saying ‘no’ to and what am I saying ‘yes’ to? How am I being influenced by the culture, and how is the culture influencing me?”

That’s what Joshua told the people to do, “Choose right now who you will serve.” Choose right now what will you say ‘yes’ to, and what will you say ‘no’ to. Choose what kind of culture you will be.

What relationships will you choose to focus on, what after-work or after-school activities will you prioritize? What extra-curricular activities of our kids and grandkids will you choose to attend or skip? What parties will you attend? What daily errands have to be done, and which ones can be postponed? What weekly and monthly meetings will you attend? What can you “cheat” in order to more effectively meet the demands of the full schedule you have chosen?

We talked about this last week: Drawing from the book by Andy Stanley, “Choosing to Cheat,” I said that we do not have enough time in a day to finish or complete all the things we think we have to get done. So, we “cheat” other commitments in order to finish other things. We all cheat. We all choose to cheat.

Last night, we had our annual “Trunk or Treat,” which was organized by our Family Life Ministry Team. The members of that team chose to cheat on time they could have spent with their family, with other friends. They cleared their schedule and cheated other commitments in order to give their attention to decorate their trunk, cook hot dogs, build a fire, and prepare the apple cider.

And those who attended this event, spent a significant amount of time preparing their kids’ costumes,

driving the family over here to Chilson Hills, and then walking the family around the parking lot. They didn't have to be here. They could have chosen to be somewhere else, they could have chosen to cheat another commitment to skip out on the Trunk or Treat. But they didn't, they chose to be here last night.

The schedule that structured our lives this past week, was a series of choices we made. How did you feel about those choices? How do you feel about what you chose to cheat?

How do you feel about what you have accomplished?

When you look back on the week and what you have spent your time doing, how do you feel about it?

Are you proud of what you did and how you spent your time? Are there some things that seem like a waste of time? Are you glad that you spent all those hours at work? Are you glad that you fulfilled this commitment? Are you anxious about ignoring or postponing this responsibility?

Whether you feel good about your week, or whether you feel frustrated or discouraged about what you did or didn't do, these feelings are shaped and fashioned based on personal values. And these values establish priorities. And the priorities determine

what we choose to do and what we choose not to do.

So our activities are expressions of our priorities which have been aligned because of our values. And where do our values come from?

Well, values are shaped when we are young - very young. Our values are influenced by the culture in which we live. The culture impacts the decisions that mothers and father make, and how they raise their children - this is where values come from. And our values are what help us feel safe and secure in the world. Our values help us make sense and derive meaning in our world.

So, for instance, if a child receives consistent approval from their parents because of their academic or their athletic achievement. The child will value achievement, and their priorities will reflect the importance of achievement, and their schedules will be focused on achievement.

If a child feels a rush of adrenaline when their mother or father laughs at their jokes, or claps when they perform well, they will likely value attention, and they will prioritize their lives and put themselves in a position where they can have attention.

Our values were shaped at a very young age to help us bring order to the world, to help us feel safe and

secure about what we experience. And those values affect our priorities and how they are aligned. And the alignment of our priorities determine how we will fill our schedule.

And if we look back at our biblical text for today, we can see that Joshua is keenly aware of this. Joshua understands that God plays a key role in the formation of values. Joshua sees the world around them, he knows about the cultures he has encountered and the kind of values they create. Joshua sees how worshipping other idols will affect his children, how they will affect his priorities, and how they will affect what fills his schedule. And so, Joshua realizes that he can't say 'yes' to everything. He must say 'no' to something. And so, he says,

But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.

This will be our priority. We will say 'no' to the cultures around us. Others may choose to go a different direction, but we won't choose that path. We will "serve" the Lord. God, the one true God will be our priority. And that means that we won't devote our time to other gods, other distractions, and other religious pursuits. That means that we won't do what other people are doing. We will serve the Lord.

And by saying this, Joshua was not only choosing a belief structure, he

was choosing a culture, he was choosing a way of life, he was choosing a set of values that would be distinct.

This past week I was at a meeting of local social service agencies that get together to collaborate and work on addressing the issue of homelessness in Livingston County. I don't know if you know this or not, but Livingston County is in the midst of a housing crisis right now. Without going into details or long explanations, it is very difficult to find an affordable house or apartment in our county right now.

So, on any given day there are around 100 people who are homeless, who cannot afford to pay for the houses and apartments that are in this county.

So, where can they go? Some will find a family member, and since there is no shelter in Livingston County, the agencies find housing for their client by providing a week or two weeks (sometimes longer) in our local hotels. But many hotels don't want people who are homeless, and the only affordable options are a couple hotels in Brighton and Howell and the most popular choice is The Kensington Inn in Howell.

The Kensington is a rough place that receives frequent calls from the police for all kinds of criminal activity. And the people who run the motel, treat

their guests and our agencies disrespectfully.

Well, this past week, the housing director at Salvation Army couldn't take it anymore. After hearing another report of a guest that had been poorly treated, he walked into the chapel and prayed, "God, I can't do this anymore. I won't send people to this hotel anymore to be mistreated."

So he told his supervisor that even if it meant losing his job, he wasn't going to send clients to Kensington anymore. He started calling around and found that many hotels would not take homeless people and that the only hotel that would, would charge him double the price of what it costs at Kensington.

And I told him, "Then it's our job to support you and your decision to do the right thing."

That's what happens when you decide who you're going to serve. When you make that decisions, others will follow.

After Joshua decides what he is going to say 'yes' to and what he's going to say 'no' to, after he decides what kind of life he will live, after he decides what he is going to "cheat" and who he will serve.

The people respond and say, "We would never desert the Lord! We

would never serve other gods! The Lord our God himself brought us and our parents up out of Egypt. He brought us out of that land where we were slaves." (24:16,17)

His bold decision to serve the Lord would affect the values of his own family and their priorities. His response changed the culture around him.

And the same could be true for you. You can change your life, your family and your culture, by deciding to serve the Lord. Other people may choose to fill their lives with other stuff, but you can change the culture by choosing to serve the Lord.