

2020: The Global Year of the Bible
The Third Sunday of Lent: Joshua 24
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A Lamp and a Light, Part 11
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We have just made it through a week unlike any other week any of us have lived through. Wide-spread panic and fear have emptied store shelves of everyday items. My brother-in-law Jim in Massachusetts, who has been in the grocery business ever since high school, said he has never seen anything like it. We get a little something in our throats and have to cough, and we feel nervous. Am I getting sick?

There are two things I want to offer as I begin God's message today from my living room. First, some words from C.S. Lewis that he wrote 72 years ago about the atomic bomb. I'm going to replace the words *atomic bomb* with *virus*. "This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by a virus, let that virus when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing a game, chatting to our friends—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about viruses. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds."¹

Secondly, I want to offer a prayer that was shared by a catholic priest we met years ago on a mission trip in Camden, NJ. The prayer was written by Cameron Wiggins Bellm. Let us pray:

- † May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.
- † May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.
- † May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.
- † May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options.
- † May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go.
- † May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.
- † May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.
- † As fear grips our country, let us choose love during this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbor. Amen.

I don't think it is mere coincidence that we are in the book of Joshua right now in our Bible reading plan. Moses, the beloved leader of the nation of Israel has died. Joshua has taken on the leadership mantle. The Israelite nation has crossed the Jordan River from the east side to the west side. The Jordan River at this time was at flood stage, and the people are now standing in the Promised Land. Just like the Red Sea, God parted the water of the overflowing river as soon as the priests carrying the ark of the covenant put their foot into the water. They had to take that first step of faith before God showed his own faithfulness to his promise.

Now they are all on the west side of the river and Joshua has some words for them that sound very similar to Moses' words on the east side. We are going to take a quick walk through most of Joshua 24.

Joshua starts by reminding them where they have come from. He is reminding them that their ancestors in the faith were not always faithful to the One True God – that they were enticed by worshipping false gods. God, who is a choosing God, reminds them how he chose Abraham,

¹ "On Living in an Atomic Age" (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*.

chose Isaac, chose Jacob (*later renamed Israel*), chose Moses, chose Caleb and Joshua, and chose the whole of the nation of Israel to bring them into the land he had chosen for them. Joshua reminds them how God fought for them - how God went before them - how God prepared a fruitful land for them.

As you hear these words from Joshua, it is ok to also think about how God's merciful choosing has been evident in your life. And, it is ok to think about the choices we have every day to keep our feet on the narrow pathway to follow Jesus.

"Then Joshua summoned all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, including their elders, leaders, judges, and officers. So they came and presented themselves to God. ² Joshua said to 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 they worshiped other gods. ³ But I took your ancestor Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him into the land of Canaan. I gave him many descendants through his son Isaac. ⁴ To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I gave the mountains of Seir, while Jacob and his children went down into Egypt. ⁵ "Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I brought terrible plagues on Egypt; and afterward I brought you out as a free people. ⁶ But when your ancestors arrived at the Red Sea, the Egyptians chased after you with chariots and charioteers. ⁷ When your ancestors cried out to the Lord, I put darkness between you and the Egyptians. I brought the sea crashing down on the Egyptians, drowning them. With your very own eyes you saw what I did. Then you lived in the wilderness for many years. ⁸ "Finally, I brought you into the land of the Amorites on the east side of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I destroyed them before you. I gave you victory over them, and you took possession of their land. ⁹ Then Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, started a war against Israel. He summoned Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to him. Instead, I made Balaam bless you, and so I rescued you from Balak. ¹¹ "When you crossed the Jordan River and came to Jericho, the men of Jericho fought against you, as did the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. But I gave you victory over them. ¹² And I sent terror ahead of you to drive out the two kings of the Amorites. It was not your swords or bows that brought you victory. ¹³ I gave you land you had not worked on, and I gave you towns you did not build—the towns where you are now living. I gave you vineyards and olive groves for food, though you did not plant them. ¹⁴ "So fear the Lord and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord alone. ¹⁵ But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua is taking a stand here, and he is encouraging the people to take the same stand. There will be so many other things: false gods, enemies, sicknesses, i.e. viruses, etc. that try to take away our attention, our thoughts, our time, our loyalty, our devotion, our singular commitment to God alone. The word 'But' at the beginning of his declaration, "But as for me and my family (or house), we will serve the Lord," reveals his staunch, unwavering commitment. But, even if you don't serve the Lord, even if the whole nation goes cray-cray (crazy), my household is now serving and will continue to serve the Lord. He is planting his flag irregardless of what everyone else is doing. "We're serving the LORD. Period. That is my story and I'm sticking to it. We're serving the LORD." (And by the way, the fact that we are not meeting together in our church building doesn't mean we are giving in to what everyone else is doing. It means we are serious about taking care of our people. It means we don't want to put our more vulnerable folks at risk. It means we are using good judgement. It means we are being good citizens. We are still the church – we just aren't gathered in one spot at the moment.)

I read what Joshua said, and I thought about John and my household when our kids were growing up. As they got older there was some pushback about going to Sunday school and church. It wasn't severe, but it was there. Our response was always the same. "This is who we are. This is what we do as a family on Sundays. As long as you are living here with us, you'll do what we do as a family." Giving them a choice, letting them choose based on raging hormones and the desire to stay in bed or watch TV or (in these days) be on their phones on Sunday

mornings was giving them over to all the other voices seeking to influence and educate OUR children. No. We were called to be their main influencers, we were called to see to the Christian education of our children. Parents: Take your stand. Plant your flag. Make the choice: As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. It's not easy, but it is a choice you have to make.

Let's keep reading: ¹⁶*The people replied, "We would never abandon the Lord and serve other gods. ¹⁷For the Lord our God is the one who rescued us and our ancestors from slavery in the land of Egypt. He performed mighty miracles before our very eyes. As we traveled through the wilderness among our enemies, he preserved us. ¹⁸It was the Lord who drove out the Amorites and the other nations living here in the land. So we, too, will serve the Lord, for he alone is our God."* Ok. That sounds pretty good, right? It sounds strong. They get it. God got them where they are. "We, too, will serve the Lord."

¹⁹Then Joshua warned the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy and jealous God." Wait, what? After all the hype, now Joshua tells them "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy and jealous God."

Joshua is saying this very important truth to them and to us today: Serving God, being loyal to God, doing everything God says to do just as he tells us to do it, is not possible by our own good thoughts or willpower. It is not possible by our own strength. It is not possible just because we say we're going to do it. Serving God, being loyal to him, not falling apart in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of the storms of life is only possible by allowing **Him** to be our courage, to be our strength, and to be our Savior. You want God to come through for you? Then stop trying to come through on your own strength, on your own wisdom, on your own resources, on your own good name, on your own willpower. Does anybody hear me out there? Somebody say AMEN wherever you are!!!!

Now, look what he tells them to do next. ²¹*But the people answered Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!"* ²²*"You are a witness to your own decision," Joshua said. "You have chosen to serve the Lord." "Yes," they replied, "we are witnesses to what we have said."* ²³*"All right then," Joshua said, "destroy the idols among you, and turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."*

In other words, put your money where your mouth is - show God you mean it. Adam Clarke, Bible commentator wrote, "As you have promised to reform, begin instantly the work of reformation. A man's promise to serve God soon loses its moral hold of his conscience if he does not instantaneously begin to put it in practice." As for you and your household, you're choosing to serve the LORD - what's that going to look like starting today that's different than yesterday? If you struggle with alcoholism, take those bottles and pour them down the drain. Show God you're you mean it. If you're having trouble forgiving, as soon as this sermon is over, go pick up your phone and make it right. Make today different than yesterday. Students, if you are at home and are already treating your parents disrespectfully, stop being a jerk. Make today different than yesterday. **By God's grace make the choice, and by God's grace, make the changes.**

I watched the movie *Harriet* about Harriet Tubman who was born and died in this month of March 91 years apart. Harriet escaped slavery in Maryland by making it across the Pennsylvania state line, and then made some 13 missions back to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, including family & friends. She was an extraordinarily courageous and stubborn woman with a great big faith in a great big God! She made the choice for herself, "As for me and my house, I'm serving the LORD," and even though she was warned not to return to her former plantation to rescue her family, she didn't listen. She said over and over, "God is with me," and she never faltered in serving the Lord in her life.

Folks, the word serve is used 14 times in Joshua 24. "As for me and my house, we will serve...the Lord." What does it mean? What does it look like? John Piper writes the following:

"It means to do what he says in a way that makes him look supremely valuable in himself. It means to submit to him in a way that makes him look thrilling. There are ways to submit to God that only make him look threatening, not thrilling. There are ways to do what he says that only call attention to the fact that he is an authority, not a treasure. That kind of service is not the service God commands. What's the difference?"

The difference is that God has told us not to serve him as though he needed anything. "Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Both these texts put all the emphasis on God's giving to us when we serve. So the kind of service that makes God look valuable and thrilling (as he is) is the kind that serves God by constantly receiving from God. The key text to describe this is 1 Peter 4:11 — "Whoever serves, [let it be] as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

God is seen as glorious when all our serving is moment-by-moment receiving from God's supply. We receive this supply *by faith*. That is, we trust moment by moment that what we need, in serving him, he will supply ("life, breath, and everything"). This is the opposite of being anxious. Such serving is joyful. And it makes God look no less authoritative, but infinitely more desirable. This is the glory he means to have. The Giver gets the glory. Therefore, *"serve the Lord with gladness" (Psalm 100:2).*" (Which by the way is Phyllis Ciarrocca's favorite psalm.)

Does that help? As for me and my house, we will serve – we will allow God to supply us with everything we need to make our lives count for him! No worries! God! No unforgiveness! God! No bitterness! God! No despair! God! Must I go on?

So when we think about our Lenten Study: Something Needs to Change, we think about the question, "How are we to serve the Lord by serving others in Jesus' name who are living in urgent physical and spiritual need?" Well, what is God pouring into us that we can pour out into the lives of others? Minds to think? Yes. Hearts to care about not just the people who live next door, but people who live across the world from us? We're getting there. Hands to help? Absolutely! Money to support already effective ongoing efforts? Indeed. What else? What else, Lord? O Lord, show us how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds, but not to our glory, not to us, but to your name be glory forever!

So, here we are. In our homes 'having church.' Scott Naugle asked, What about songs? Do you have a piano in your house? Of course I do! And then somehow in the messages flowing back and forth between the elders, somehow John playing the saxophone became a request for this live event. Well, we don't have a saxophone, and even if we did, John can't play the saxophone. He can blow on one of the old organ pipes – but that's about it.

Let's keep joyfully moving forward, church, by making the choice that from household to household, no matter whether there is one person in your house or 10 people, as for me and my house, we will today, tomorrow, and forever serve the Lord. Let's say it together: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

We love you. We are praying for all of you. Think about it: This is an incredibly opportune time to serve the Lord by talking to the people around you who are feeling afraid, to tell them about your faith in Jesus. Don't hold back. May our service to Christ bring significant increase to the population of Heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.