

## Choices

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This inspirational story of Joshua in the OT is really all about choices.

There is a painting from long ago art history which was explained to me, and how it talks about choices that seems strangely relevant today.

It was in 1653, the artist Rembrandt painted the ancient Greeks as his subject matter. It is complex at first glance. It has been interpreted many ways. It is a painting of Aristotle looking over the bust of Homer. But around Aristotle's neck is a medallion of Alexander the Great.

Alexander the great was a student of Aristotle. But, Aristotle is putting his hand on the statue of Homer. And the painting shows a choice, a contrast, and the struggle is evident in the sense of contemplation of a choice.

Is it Alexander's way or Homer's way? Is it action, force, military might represented by Alexander, or is it the world of ideas and writing and poetry as seen through Homer.

Both ways exist, both ways can change the world. And he is weighing the choice.

Seems we have always thought about with this. Are problems solved by force and might alone? Or is there a role for, as General Milley recently said, research, understanding and intellect to go along with that force?

(I am trying to understand the recent backlash in the past 5 years against knowledge, science, expertise and intellectualism, but it is hard to see. Perhaps it is wrapped in this enigma of Aristotle in Rembrandts painting.)

(The great villain in the Harry Potter series, "He who shall not be named" famously said:

"There is no good or evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it")

Choices. We make them all of the time. They range from the more mundane of where will I live, what home will I live in, what is for dinner, whom will I marry all the way to a more philosophical, What are my values, what is my moral compass?

If you do appreciate history, you know we have choices most of our forebearers did not. Let's be honest - the entertainment, the sports, the food, the freedom to move about where we wish.

A product of an affluent country is the number of choices available to us every day. In fact, one social

worker defined poverty in the exact opposite. Poverty, she said is basically a lack of choices.

So that brings us to Joshua. As you might expect, he puts all of those choices which I just referenced under the context of once choice, and that is "Do I serve the God of my ancestors, the God of Abraham, or is there another whom I serve?"

It must have been quite a scene. Joshua gathers the tribes together at a place called Shechem. Jacob's well is there. Joseph is buried there. It is an important place. But there is also distraction there - there is a temple to the Ba'al gods of nature, worshipped by other cultures.

It is the promised land, but still feels strange with many cultures and competing interests, so Joshua says to them "Choose this day whom you will serve. Will you serve the many gods or the one true God and father of us all?"

Then Joshua states his position. "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." He challenges them, but leaves it to them to decide a path.

He doesn't coerce them but rather, leaves a choice.

In doing so in OT this passage, he frames three ways to consider what choices are all about, and a way to approach choices with three words which a Biblical commentator succinctly recorded.

The three words are: Remembrance, Reality and Renewal

Remembrance: To have memory and a history is perhaps something which separates us from other species. To

have memory and think critically about what we do remember is to be human. Memory is powerful.

This is how Joshua approaches the people of Israel. He recounts for them the Passover, the Exodus, the wilderness, how God led them. As he reminded them of those stories, they remembered. And it was like they experienced it anew.

Those great events when their faith told them God was with them. As we think about the future, or which way we should go, we first do well to remember how God has guided us in the past. All of the blessings, the lessons learned, even the struggles, and how they were overcome or still remain.

This is a good lesson for a transitional time in a church for example. I love the story which I think you know about Saint Mark not having a Sanctuary during the last Interim period, 20 years ago, but yet were led through and came through as a strong vibrant community of faith. That is part of our history. Which helps inform our future.

Joshua helps the people remember.

Second, Joshua offered the people Reality. The people of Israel had a common human trait, in that they wanted to hedge their bets a little by acknowledging the God of Abraham, but also worshipping other gods as well. Joshua is telling them this is an illusion and not reality. In modern language, you could say he calls them out.

This is a strange part of the passage to hear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But the bottom -line Joshua challenges them with is: you can't walk down two roads at the same time.

Or as the great Yogi Berra said, when you see a fork in the road take it.

But which one?

Since this is our American holiday of July 4<sup>th</sup>, how would you think of this challenge of Joshua in our current context?

I mention this because Eddie Glaude of Princeton University in the past year wrote a Book on James Baldwin called

"Begin Again" He is reflecting on the past year of increasing concern over racial justice after the murder of George Floyd last summer.

And in interviews discussing the book, he kept bringing up the word "Choose", he kept urging people to look at the reality of what is going on and choose.

And I kept thinking "What did he mean by calling on people to choose?"

He said it was like the old Robert Johnson blues song - Crossroads.

We are at a crossroads in what our national community will look like.

"We are kind of at a crossroad, of a broad moral reckoning. The question is will we choose to be otherwise or will we double down..." on some of the injustices of the past?

He says if we are to begin again,

"This will demand a new American story, different symbols and robust policies to repair what we have done."

But we can choose to begin again. But this is the time, Glaude says, when we must choose.

He challenges us with reality.

Joshua is speaking primarily of the reality of choosing whom we will serve, but when we do that, along with that comes: what moral compass do we have, what are our core values as an individual and as a community, what does God call me to do once I decide to follow the God of Abraham?

When we are making choices, we have to be honest enough to embrace reality, not try to suppress it or pretend it didn't happen or is not happening. Not be afraid to look at hard facts, or even uncomfortable truths. Or ban some school district from looking at history or reality.

### 3. Renewal:

The word renewal means to re-commit yourself. To re-commit to God. Joshua asked the people if they are willing to be renewed in their faith. The people responded, "Yes we are willing!"

That is why this is a good passage to consider as we slowly emerge from our pandemic experience. I think

individually, we are all probably ready for a time of renewal.

In particular, in our congregational time together, this is a time of renewal, or it can be. As we prepare for what God calls us to do in the next 6 months, year or two years.

Next week we will hear about the results of our CAT survey, and what that means for the future. Our PNC is doing great work, as we heard last week.

And, also, however it is that we get ourselves back to in-person worship may seem a little different at first, but if we look at it as a new birth, a new beginning, and remember God has guided us through these times before, we can see it as the adventure in faith that it is.

It is a time of renewal. We look for a spiritual renewal, as well.

But it's about choices.

Yes, we have a lot of choices to make, in our world, and even in the church, and that is a tremendous blessing. But don't forget that one big choice that Joshua put his full weight down on -who are we going to serve?

Regardless of what ministry we are working with, where we are on our walk with God, what side of the aisle we live on, I hope we can say those five words that Joshua said about his house:

We will serve the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

