

PR16.B

12TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
August 27, 2006Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18
Ephesians 5:21-31
John 6:60-69

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

1Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. 2And Joshua said to all the people, 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. 15Now 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."

16Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17for 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; 18and 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."

I recall a man asking me when I "became a Christian". I was pretty sure I would not be able to answer that question to his satisfaction - but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was I was not sure if I could answer that question to my satisfaction. When did I become a Christian? I told him the truth. I was baptized on April Fool's Day, 1956 at First Methodist Church in Nacona, Texas. ... I was right. He was not satisfied. That is not a dramatic story. I don't remember, but my experience with my family and with Nacona, Texas lead me to believe that it was not a particularly emotional experience, either.

He said, "No, when did you become a Christian? When did you decide?"

This is a poor understanding of a profound concept – decision.

The term "decision" has fallen on hard times in the church. It's thrown around a lot; and as many times as the word "decision" is used in the church - it has that many different definitions. I see a lot of people trying to talk other people into "deciding" about their

religion...and it usually means a dramatic story of emotion charged promises. A three month old baby in Nacona won't do.

People reserve the right to make their own decisions.

But as they make decisions, it often comes out: "I will serve God - because I'm very excited, and everything feels right, and it seems likely to me that I will continue to feel this way." ...That's not a decision; that's a prediction.

Or there are decisions such as: "I will serve God - because if I promise to serve him, maybe he will cure a sick loved one, or help my business, or straighten out my kids." ...That's not a decision, either; that's a bargain.

Predictions are based on "now". (How do I feel now? What kind of mood am I in now? What are the chances that things will stay exactly like they are right now?) Bargains are also based on "now". (What do I need now? If I don't need it tomorrow, then I will get out of the bargain.)

Predictions are based on now; bargains are based on now. But decisions are based on the future. Decisions pick us up and move us forward.

As we look in on Joshua and the people of Israel in this morning's First Lesson, they had conquered the land that God had been promising for hundreds of years. They were ready to live there. Joshua gathered all the people and he said, "...serve only the Lord. If you are not willing to serve him, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your ancestors worshiped in Mesopotamia or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are now living. As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua is not calling for a prediction. He does not say, "See if it seems likely to you that you will serve God." Joshua calls for a decision. A decision has consequences. Decisions change life, they do not just observe it. They do not look at how life is. Decisions set a direction for how life will be.

That is why a relationship with God that is based on a prediction is not a reason for optimism. To say, "It is likely that I will serve God" is not saying much. Predictions don't have much to do with a relationship with God. (A relationship with God is many things; but it is not predictable.) A relationship with God calls for decisions.

The greatest evidence I can find for how much God values his children is his call to them to make decisions. Since the time of Joshua, the story has been the same. God had given them freedom. He had protected them for forty years. He gave them victory in battle. ... And still, he called for their decision - their immediate decision. The words of Joshua are, "...decide today". And there we have the evidence for God's value of his children. Valuable, important people are called to make valuable, important decisions. Joshua said, "Decide which gods you will serve, and do it now." That is the sort of demand that is placed on important people – people whose decisions make a difference. Unimportant creatures could avoid making decisions, but Joshua did not give that option.

People make decisions because people are important. God has entrusted you with no less than a human life and now you have to make decisions about where that life is going and what it will do. But you must make decisions. A human life is so important - it will not go unnoticed. You can't hide. You can't avoid a decision. You are too important; you are the keeper of a human life.

We try to postpone decisions. We might say, "We'll think about our values when we've taken care of today's schedule and gotten a little breathing room." But that does not postpone a decision. It is a decision - for indifference. We might say, "We'll decide what to teach our children about their relationships with God when they will understand better." But that does not postpone a decision. Every passing day teaches them that a relationship with God is not important enough to talk about. We might say, "We'll forgive when those people who need it change, and the opportunity presents itself." But that does not postpone a

decision. It is a choice for anger and the supremacy of being alone over the love of God. Important people can not avoid decisions.

A human life is based on your decisions – your human life. And decisions make a difference. That's why Joshua wasn't concerned with predictions. He called for decisions. Decisions are based on commitment. Decisions do more than observe how we are and guess how we will be.

Predictions can call out, "We think it's certain that we will serve God; all the signs point to it." Bargains can call out, "We will serve God - as long as it seems to be doing some good." Decisions place our lives in the hands of God and give them a direction.

Christ comes into our lives and our lives are different. Where we are right now is not so important as where we are going. God came to be part of our lives and he wants to be part of the decisions we make - the direction we're going. The decisions we make do not describe our lives...the decisions we make change our lives.

Decide whom you will serve. Start now. You've got a good idea about some of the people you will see in the coming week. Decide what you will say to them. Decide to say things that will serve God. (You see, you are not thinking about what you would likely say...you are changing it, and you are serving God.) Don't just decide what you will say to people; decide what you will say about people. Decide how you will spend your time. Decide to listen to people in your home. Decide to make your co-workers' lives easier. Decide to say things that will make the people you go to school with happier.

These decisions will change our lives. They will carry us into the future and make it a place where we will serve God. Predictions are either right or wrong. They can be made once and for all, but not decisions. Decisions are the stuff of continual planning and education. Decisions have to be constantly examined, loyally sacrificed for.

The people of God still gather and hear the call of Joshua. It hasn't changed. "...serve only the Lord. If you are not willing to serve him, decide today whom you will serve, the gods

your ancestors worshiped" ..gods of shallowness, or laziness, or waste. Gods of missed opportunities.

God loves us enough to give us the incredibly valuable gift of our lives; now we must decide what we will do with them. He gives us a place to put our lives. We can serve him.

We can decide to speak kindly to one another. We can decide to educate our children and ourselves; to give money to feed people. We can decide to let people know God loves them. We can decide to worship God.

Every decision we make changes things. The power of God is to change for the better.

As we read the First Lesson, Joshua gives the famous old call. "...decide today whom you will serve." The people of God give a fine answer, "The people replied, 'We would never leave the Lord to serve other gods!...we also will serve the Lord; he is our God!'"

Keep that answer where you can get to it quickly. You won't even be able to make it home from church today without being called to make another decision – probably a minor one. Maybe too minor to even notice, but it will be a decision of whether or not to serve God, and the Lord has plans for your life.

Do the most important thing you can with the most important gift you own. Use your life to serve God.