

CHOICES THAT MUST BE MADE
JOSHUA 24: 1-3a, 14-25

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University Church of Chicago
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Realizing that he was on the wrong road, a traveler in West Virginia stopped in a village and said to a passerby, "Can you help me? I'm lost."

The West Virginian replied, "Do you know where you are? ' Yes, said the traveler. I saw the name of your village when I drove into town.

Do you know where you want to go? asked the local man. "Yes," the traveler replied, naming his destination.

"Then you aren't lost," the West Virginian responded philosophically, "You just need directions."

When we have to deal with words like corporate downsizing, re-engineering, postmodernism, cyberspace, and ..., it should not surprise us that the directions given for the road to the twenty-first century will be vague and changeable. Today's Old Testament lection marks an important watershed in the life of Israel. The tribes have, for all practical purposes, succeeded in their settlement of the Promised Land.

And now that the settlement is complete, the tribes are about to embark on their new life, no longer as nomads, but as permanent residents of the cities and farmlands of Canaan. Therefore, the assembly at Schechem marks a transition from one era into another. At this major junction in their lives, the people are summoned by Joshua to make a fundamental decision concerning their allegiance and destiny.

As Moses mediated the presence of God to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, so Joshua does the same at Schechem. This is not just a gathering of the people, but an encounter with Israel's God. "Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Schechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel, and they presented themselves before God" (v. 1).

Joshua begins his address to the people by summarizing their history. "Since Yahweh has done all these things, so now you (Israel) are obliged to respond, and if you will not serve Yahweh, then you must declare whom you will serve" (v. 15). And then those words which have resounded through time: "As for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh."

These people had not always followed God's commandments. Like us, they had doubted, rebelled and questioned. And like us, they had forgotten God's promise, complained and yearned for the good old days. Even when Moses had climbed to the top of Mount Sinai (no easy trek, I can tell you from personal experience) to receive the Ten Commandments, the Israelites had been down in the valley melting their bracelets and rings and jewelry in order to make a golden calf to worship. When God had given them food to eat every morning when they awakened in the desert, they had called out for a more varied diet.

Remember the scouts who were sent out by Moses to explore the possible perils of the journey? They came back with fearful reports: enemies twelve feet tall with horrendous weapons, mountains and rivers too formidable to contend with. The majority report declared that the Israelites would be defeated by the Caananites, that it was best to stay where they were.

But there was a minority report. Joshua and Caleb declared that God had made promises and, therefore, God would be with them as they made their way through all the obstacles into the Land of Promise.

These are people who have traveled for forty years, and they have now crossed the river and are ready to settle the land God promised them so long ago. The image of the traveler, the sojourner, the pilgrim is central to our faith. We travel this lonesome road, and we have to know and follow the rules.

Joshua calls them in this solemn assembly not only to remember the past, but to make a choice about how they will live in the future. It's a scary moment for the people. They can no longer live in indifference. They have to decide whether to live within the pagan culture of Mesopotamia and Egypt or in God's way.

Lucius Beebe was a great story-teller, a bon vivant, a gourmet of a previous generation. He lived in New York City all his adult life, wrote for *The New Yorker*, went to all the best restaurants, knew all the popular people, mingled with high society. His one demand was that all his food and all his wine had to be served at room temperature. Not too hot, not too cold.

Late in life, Beebe faced stomach surgery—probably as a result of all that eating and drinking. When Tallulah Bankhead, the famous actress, heard about his impending surgery, she remarked, “Oh, dear. I do hope the doctors will open Lucius at room temperature.”

God, says St. John in the Book of the Revelation, hates lukewarm people. God demands that we choose whether we will follow in faith. “Because you are neither hot nor cold but only lukewarm, I will spew you out of my mouth.”

Leonard Sweet gives five rules of the road in his book **Quantum Spirituality**:

Road Rule #1: **You can't steer a parked car.** We love to control as much of our lives as we can, we want our lives to be secure. But control and security easily lead to stagnation. It is only by risking, by trusting, by moving ahead that we can welcome the future.

Road Rule #2: **You can't drive forward without a rearview mirror.** It's important to look into the mirror occasionally, so that you can see what is behind you, what is approaching. But if you spend all your time looking in the mirror without looking at the road ahead, you will soon have an accident.

Road Rule #3: **You can't pass in the slow lane.** God gives each of us so much time, so much energy, so many resources. If we are going to make a difference in the world, we must use the gifts appropriately and responsibly, but also with energy and commitment. If you go slow, you get left behind.

Road Rule #4: **You can't repair a car while it's moving.** Movement is not an end in itself. When we are exhausted and in need of repair, the worst thing to do is step on the gas. We need times for renewal and repair, for maintenance and re-creation before we can advance.

Road Rule #5: **You can't run on empty.** Everyone has to have fuel. The fuel we select determines our staying power. We are given the free gift of energy through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Pay attention to the Covenant in this story. That's what it is really about. It's not about the miracle of the parting of the waters or the faith—or lack thereof—of the people. It's not about Joshua and the priests. The story goes to the heart of the faith: the Covenant that God has made with us.

The covenant is vertical, initiated by God, kept faithfully by God despite our wanderings, our unfaithfulness, our doubts and fears. Remember: the two books we call “testaments” are in the original Greek and Hebrew languages called “The Old Covenant” and “The New Covenant.” Only when the Bible was translated into Latin did the word “testamentus” get used—and subsequently translated in the King James Version into “Testament.” (No extra charge for that arcane piece of information.)

Remember also that when Jesus took the bread and wine on the last night of his life and wanted to seal God's promise forever, he called the elements the body and blood of the New Covenant. God's promise is renewed every time we celebrate Holy Communion, and even when we do not celebrate the Sacrament—as, unfortunately Methodists do not celebrate often enough—our liturgy is designed to be ante-Communion, that is, to come up to the point of the Sacrament every week.

Don Wardlaw, who taught preaching at McCormick Theological Seminary for a number of years, is the son of a Presbyterian clergyman who served in Louisiana. When his father died, Don and his

family went back to the church in Louisiana, the last one his father served, for his funeral. It was a good experience; Don saw a lot of people who remembered his Dad and told him stories about him.

One man who had served as the church's sexton had moved away but he returned for Dr. Wardlaw's funeral. He went up to Don and said, "You know, your Dad was very, very special and important to me." Don replied, "Oh, I know, Leon; you were very important to him." The man said, "No, I don't think you understand. I don't think I would be here today if it were not for your Dad. I would not have made it through that horrible night."

"What do you mean?" Don asked. The man told Don a story: "During the time that your Dad was pastor of this church and he and I worked together here, you probably don't remember this, because you were a little boy, but my wife died suddenly. She was only thirty-four years old. She was hanging out clothes on the line. She had a massive heart attack. She didn't even make it to the hospital alive. We had four small kids. I will never forget that day. I was just devastated. I was so emotionally drained that I fell across the bed.

"I remember lying in the bed and it had gotten dark. I looked up at one point and I could see your Dad had come into the room and was sitting in a rocking chair beside my bed rocking. He just sat there rocking. All night long I would wake up and I would reach over to where my wife usually was and I would feel that emptiness. The pain would shoot through me like a thousand arrows. And I wondered how in the world I could go on. And then, out of the corner of my eye I would see him rocking, rocking. It was the rocking that helped me make it through the night."

Sometimes we see the rocking clearly. More often, we see it out of the corner of our eye. For the children of Israel in this story of the crossing of the Jordan, Joshua is like the pastor rocking. He doesn't perform miracles. He just reminds them of the promise.. He points to the Promised Land and reminds them of God's promise which never fails.

And tells them they have to make some choices. "Choose this day whom you will serve."