

Zaida Rodriguez

This sermon was written to be preached in the context of a Presbyterian Church. It could be for a bilingual or Spanish-speaking congregation for a Baptism Sunday. In this sermon I included a historical overview of the Israelite people, under Abraham's, Jacob's, and Joshua's leadership. In that historical overview I set the chapter within the whole book of Joshua, and noted the references to Moses's commandments. During my search and study the motifs that were repeated over and over were God's calling, covenants, service/worship, and God's grace. These motifs are the cornerstones that defined the Israelite's identity as people of God. Exploring this identity offers Joshua and the other leaders of the ancient Israelites, as well as people of today, the opportunity to discern what that identity means and how these motifs are at work- or not- in their lives. Furthermore, this sermon could speak for the needs that we all have to discern our calling as parents, as members of a community of faith and as leaders in the church and community.

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Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25 New Jerusalem Bible

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem; he then summoned all the elders of Israel, its leaders, judges and officials, and they presented themselves to God's.

Joshua then said to all the people: "Yahweh, the God of Israel, says this, "From time immemorial, your ancestors, Terah, father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River, and served other gods.

I then brought your ancestor Abraham from beyond the River and led him through the length and breadth of Canaan.

"So now, fear Yahweh and serve him truly and sincerely; banish the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh.

But if serving Yahweh seems a bad thing to you, today you must make up your minds whom you do mean to serve, whether the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now living. As regards my family and me, we shall serve Yahweh."

The people replied, "Far be it from us to desert Yahweh and to serve other gods!"

Yahweh our God was the one who brought us and our ancestors here from Egypt, from the place of slave-labor, who worked those great wonders before our eyes and who kept us safe all along the way we travelled and among all the peoples through whom we passed.

And Yahweh has driven all the nations out for us, including the Amorites who used to live in the country. We too shall serve Yahweh, for he is our God."

Joshua then said to the people, "You will not be able to serve Yahweh, since he is a holy God, he is a jealous God who will not tolerate either your misdeeds or your sins.

If you desert Yahweh and serve the foreigners' gods, he will turn and maltreat you anew and, in spite of having been good to you in the past, will destroy you."

The people replied to Joshua, "No! Yahweh is the one we mean to serve."

Joshua then said to the people, "You are witnesses to yourselves that you have chosen Yahweh, to serve him." They replied, "Witnesses we are!"

"Then banish the foreign gods which you have with you and give your allegiance to Yahweh, God of Israel!"

The people replied to Joshua, "Yahweh our God is the one whom we shall serve; his voice we shall obey!"

That day Joshua made a covenant for the people; he laid down a statute and ordinance for them at Shechem.

Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. He then took a large stone and set it there, under the oak tree in Yahweh's sanctuary.

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Our Identity

To learn our history requires examining who we are and from where we come. Perhaps we should add to that list asking ourselves who we are not. In this age of technology, it is relatively easy for any of us to go to an ancestry website and by simply entering our last names, come up with a family tree. We may be surprised about what we learn about past generations. After some time and research, we may find that our ancestors come from places far removed from where we are today. In addition to doing research on the internet, we might also ask our grandparents and family members about our family history, and from them hear stories and different perspectives about our ancestors and about where we come from.

In Puerto Rico when someone wants to learn about another person's family, we just ask, "Your grandparents, where are they?" With this question is an implied rhetorical question because we really want to address the point that we are not what or who we think we are, that there is always more to us than physical appearance or the last name. With that question, we alluded to the fact that we are a people of mixed ancestry. Puerto Ricans are descended from Tainos Indians, Spanish, and African peoples. Chances are that our blood, genes and skin includes a mix of various other races as well. That mix of races comes from a history of invasion, conquest and territorial possession from Spain, France, and lately from the United States. Puerto Rico is not the only country in that particular circumstance; there are many other territories in the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe and the United States that were conquered by great military forces and territorial invasions lasting until today. Interestingly or ironically some of those invasions were under the banner of religious crusades and in the name of God.

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In a similar way, our text for today depicts the history of a nation that was trying to make sense of who and what they were and who they were not. In the book of Joshua we read the story within the stories of the people of Israel and their religious understanding of their history. We are given an overview of a particular family from its ancestors to the members gathered as depicted in the text.

As we read, here we have Joshua, a patriarch who called certain people of the community together to review their national history and to recount the family tree. For that purpose, he gathered elders and leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. The place and the setting of that gathering was Shechem, a familiar a place for some of the elder members of the family. Shechem was the place that Yahweh appeared to Abraham and told him that Yahweh was giving to him and his descendants a promised land. In Genesis 12: 1-9, we read that Abraham set an altar to worship Yahweh that day. Later on, in Genesis 33: 18-20, we read that Jacob, too, arrived in that place and set up an altar to worship there as well. The setting of Shechem was a sacred place for the Israelites where Yahweh had encounters with them. We really don't know what Joshua had in mind but we can infer that because of the kind of reunion that he wanted to have with the leaders he may have wanted to make it in the presences of Yahweh as v. 1b stated, "they presented themselves in God's presence" and make it official.

The next announcement in the agenda for that meeting was to hear what Yahweh needed to tell the people gathered there. So the dialogue turned in verses 2-13 from Joshua to Yahweh for a "synopsis of Israel's history from Yahweh's point of view".¹ In this way Yahweh now had an active role in the story. At this point the synopsis of Israel's history was accelerated

¹ L. David Hawk, *Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narratives & Poetry, Joshua*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2002 , 267.

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to a rapid tempo, with verbs full of energy indicating God's initiative with Israel; "I then brought (v.3)", "To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau." "To Esau I gave possession (4)," "I then sent Moses and Aaron, and plagued Egypt with the wonders that I worked there; finally I brought you out (v.5)," "I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, (v.6)," "You saw with your own eyes what I did in Egypt (v.7)," "I then brought you into the country of the Amorites, I put them at your mercy (v.8)". All these active verbs implied that Israel was a nation immersed in the power of a God that brought it into being through gifts and through the promise of land. In this version of the story Yahweh is at the center, and the emphasis is that the nation's achievements, and indeed its very identity, are due solely to Yahweh.²

Then Joshua rebuked the Israelite to fear the Lord and serve God with sincere hearts; echoing here Moses' commandments in Deut. 6: 10-15. As I read this text, I wondered what was going on at the time that Joshua called the elders to "banish the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh." Perhaps indeed there were idols that some of the members of the community had from their ancestors. Perhaps the people were trying to "cover all their bases" by worshiping some of the local gods. Who knows! But certainly Joshua made a definitive commitment that day, stating emphatically that "for me and my house, we shall serve Yahweh." He challenged the people gathered there that day to serve and to choose Yahweh, reminding them that Yahweh had already chosen them. It is this act of choosing one God—and not just any God but Yahweh—that makes this people distinct from all others. In making this choice there is a recognition that Yahweh has actively shaped and guided the nation. In this statement, Joshua is saying- I choose God because God chose me,

² Ibid. 271

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and this same God has chosen you too! Choose God!

The Israelites are Yahweh people and as clearly demonstrated by the manner in which Yahweh has been involved in their history. Yahweh is Israel's God, a commitment now reaffirmed by the people.³ That action of choosing results in this nation of people led by Joshua to formalize their dedication to Yahweh through a covenant ceremony. Joshua wrote their words in the law and set up a stone to serve as witness for that generation and generations to come.

So what, you may say... what does this text have to do with us today? Well, as I noted when we started our time together today, learning about our history can help us to better understand our identity. Learning the history of our communities of faith can help us to understand our stories and our present circumstances. Of course, like the Israelite, we will find that God has chosen us and has been present all along in our worshiping community, leading and guiding us throughout our history right up to this very moment. We may learn more about what roles we play collectively and individually in this place that we call our house of worship. This text challenges us to define our identity as people of God, people called to serve and worship.⁴ And who is it we are called to serve and worship? Not just a god, not just any god, but THIS God, the God who chose us and brought us from bondage into freedom. The God who created us and walked with our ancestors. The God who celebrates diversity and provides for us even in the face of oppression and violence. Maybe the text is calling for us to examine our history and examine our lives, and to ask ourselves, "Who am I and who do I serve?"

³ Lectionary Commentary, Proper 27, pg 556

⁴ Richard D. Nelson, The Old Testament Library, Joshua Vol. 7, Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster, John Knox Press, 1997, pg.268

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Perhaps you may wonder- certainly we know we don't worship the same gods that were worshipped in the time of Joshua and the ancient Israelites. But are there other "gods" that we are perhaps serving today? One such god might be the god of consumerism. We are immersed in a society where we are constantly enticed and cajoled into buying the latest and greatest, especially when it comes to technological gadgets. We buy gadgets we don't really need, hoping that something will satisfy our deep need for connection. We spend our days waiting in line in electronic stores, wanting to be the first to get the newest technology that promises to keep us connected with people and our world. Yet in the end we are paradoxically connected to the "virtual" world while becoming more isolated and perhaps even alienated from friends and family in the real world— often to the point where we are so busy with our gadgets we no longer converse and commune with one another at the dinner table. Sounds all too familiar, doesn't it? Has anyone else had the experience of looking up from your phone at the dinner table and realizing that everyone else is also on their phones or their tablets, each in her or his own little world? Right? We've all been there.

The thing is each and every one of our daily actions and choices reflects what and whom we're choosing to serve. Where we spend our time, energy and money reflects somehow on who we are, and whose we are. When we become consumed by the temptations of our consumeristic society, we end up unsatisfied and unfulfilled. Because what we really need is something that money cannot buy, something that technology can't provide. What we really need is love, acceptance, grace, community, and a sense of wholeness. We need a life that has a sense of purpose!

In the covenant ceremony of baptism we are called and claimed by God to be connected. We are included in God's grace, with people in every time and place. In this covenant with God, barriers of race, gender, age, and status are transcended. God has chosen us; it is God who

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initiates this covenant. Our baptism symbolizes our being released from sin so that we can freely serve God. We are freed from serving other gods so that we, like Joshua, can choose to serve the One who first chose us. That service in my opinion is not a specific act or series of actions; it is a way of life, a way of relating with one another in our homes, communities, and work. Barriers around nationality, history and practices are to be overcome. In all that we do and say, in all that we are, we are to proclaim our identity as God's Beloved Community!

Whom will we serve? In our baptism we receive a new commission of service in the world. God has already chosen us. So I invite each one of us to choose God and to live with integrity into our identity as God's Beloved. As we go forth into the world, may we say with passion and conviction, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!"