

SERMON- Proper 27 (A)

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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Psalm 78:1-7

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

November 12, 2023

Matthew 25:1-13

OPENING:

The scene that happens in our Old Testament lesson, from the book of Joshua, happens all the time in movies and TV shows.

It's that dramatic moment where the hero gives the people a choice:

you can choose to come away on this dangerous mission,

to come and join on this risky and important undertaking,

OR stay behind and be safe where you are.

Sometimes, in these scenes, a literal "line in the sand" is even drawn between the two choices.

In Joshua, the choice comes at Shechem, and the choice is

between the old gods and the God of Israel,

between the old myths and the promise of Yahweh.

between Choosing God and becoming the Chosen People,

or sticking with the safety of the old ways.

To heighten the stakes, Joshua gives them this choice twice and even gives them an 'out' and tells them all the reasons that they should not enter into this covenant but instead stay behind.

ST. TIMOTHY'S:

A couple weeks ago, I mentioned that I was uncomfortable comparing St. Tim's clergy past and present to Moses and Joshua, and likewise today I hesitate to compare *this* moment from the Old Testament to our life together *now* at St. Timothy's. You might also think that comparing is too dramatic, that Charles has been combing the archives a bit too intently this week, or all this Rector talk has gone to his head.

It's indeed hard to equate:

November 12, 2023 here in Herndon, Virginia, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost WITH the moment where the Israelites, after years of wandering in the wilderness, are finally able to bask in the Promised Land, to enter into Canaan as the Chosen People.

On the other hand, we *do* turn 155 years old this month and we *have* just had this Celebration of New Ministry with myself as your 20th Rector, and we *have* just named the Reverend Brad Rundlett as Rector Emeritus.

So maybe it is worth it today, and I would argue that it's always worth it, to make sure that we are all ready to move forward together and make this covenant together, and to say, along with the Israelites: "We will serve the Lord, we have chosen God" while also asking what comes next.

LITURGY- Wedding

This sort of choice, this 'line in the sand' moment, this collective witnessing, is something we actually already do, in many ways, week after week, and in other times in our liturgical life, year after year.

Let me give you some examples:

In our Wedding ceremony, it's expressed in the Marriage service with the famous "Speak now or forever hold your peace" moment.¹ That's the awkward moment at weddings that usually elicits a giggle from the bridal party but is actually a powerful moment of covenant-making.

When the minister says that, that's Joshua drawing the line in the sand and saying (to Aunt Ethel who never thought the groom was that much of a catch, or to the father-in-law who has misgiving about the whole affair):

"Now's your chance, if you wanted to say something, do so, but if you don't have the guts to provide such testimony, your job becomes to support this thing."

No one usually says anything in that moment but imagine if Joshua were the wedding officiant (Joshua was a tough cookie, having to follow Moses and everything), he might have said something like: "You guys actually don't want to get married, it's too hard, you will never be able to make it...."

But, if you do indeed want to... Say your vows again, and say them louder. And that goes for you in the congregation to. "

LITURGY- Baptism

Other examples of these collective public promise-making:

We did so at the start of the month when we renewed our Baptismal Vows at All Saints, we did so at the Celebration of New Ministry last week. It even happens every year when you submit your pledge, your financial commitment to our shared life.

Most gloriously, it will also happen again next week when we baptize the newest member of St. Timothy's, Mary Emmanuelle Gomez.

¹ BCP, pg. 424.

We will covenant together, we will choose, on her behalf to serve and obey God. We will be witnesses to her membership in the Body of Christ, and our own as well.

Again, if Joshua were doing that baptism, with the angelic child ready and with the beaming mother and father, Joshua would put a little *pepper* into all the questions about renouncing evil and pledging to support this child, about promising to strive for justice and peace and the dignity of every human being.

Joshua would say: “Are you sure about that? If not, say so... If you would rather serve foreign gods (which in our case is complacency and indifference and fear) go ahead and stay home next week.”

VESTRY STORY

Now I am Charles, not Joshua, so I am not going to do that.

I will give you another example of this ‘line in the sand’ moment. story:

This one is a story from almost two years ago now and I was on a ZOOM interview with your Vestry, interviewing about the open position of priest-in-charge here.

It was awkward and exciting, as those things are, and everyone went around on the screen and introduced themselves and talked a little about St. Timothy’s.

Something interesting happened during those introductions, everyone stated why they had *stayed* at St. Timothy’s, and why they were still there.

This was a very strange thing for the Vestry to do when they were trying to attract a candidate to take this job, to admit that there was no small amount of indecision about sticking it out.

But guess what the vestry was doing, even if they did not know it? They were at Shechem, they were witnessing together and saying, “there have been people who have left the church, people who resigned from the vestry, God bless ‘em, but *we* have chosen to the serve the Lord here in Herndon. Having been through the wilderness together, we have inclined our hearts towards staying.”

That was a really compelling ‘line in the sand’ moment for me. I did not know you, but I fell in love a little bit there and thought this is the type of community, the type of people, that I want to covenant with and be a part of.

At that Zoom Meeting, I remember, in particular, when it was Julie Gomez’s turn, she said with that smile of hers: “We are the young people who stayed.” And they stayed through their move to Oakton and through the birth of their child. And then they will show up next week again to enter Mary Emmanuelle into this exciting and dangerous life known as Christian discipleship.

It's our job to make those promises with them and to stay with them, to walk with them on that dangerous mission as the work goes on.

Today's lesson is the hinge point, the crossroads moment, it's the Wedding Day, the and the Baptism Day. *Tomorrow* is the difficult work that follows, it's marriage full of high points and low points, it's the child growing up into a difficult tween, and a diffident teen. We must choose to stay then too.

CONCLUSION

I would like to close on that note, on how we live this covenant out in the days that follow.

The site of Shechem in the Holy Land is featured throughout the Bible as a holy place for the Jewish people. Today it lies in what's known as "the West Bank"—it saw its share of violence in the Old Testament, just as it's seen its share of violence in recent days.

Thinking about that, I wanted to share again the story that I sent out via email on Tuesday of this week.

After the violence in the Middle East erupted a month ago in Gaza, tensions flared between Muslims and Jews across the globe and here in the United States.

The ADAMS Center, the local collection of mosques here based out of Sterling, offered a message of support and prayer to the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation, the local synagogue in Reston.² It's amazing that for the last 15 years, Muslims have used this synagogue for their prayers every Friday. But the ADAMS Center said that because of everything that was going on, they would take the week off and not come that coming Friday.

The Rabbi responded with the letter saying that they appreciated the sensitivity and the concern, that tensions had indeed been heightened, but that the prayers should continue, that the covenant remained, that now more than ever they need to provide the witness that these 2 great Abrahamic faiths can walk together, can use the same sacred space for prayer.

We want to be in that Covenant too, to be "God wrestlers" the people *Yisrael* who can enter into a room and take their shoes off and pray, and witness and covenant and make promises to each in front of God for the good of this community of St. Tim's and for this country, and for the world.

AMEN

² [NVHC Public-Call-to-Jumma-Prayer-10-13-23-2.pdf](#)