

WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!

August 25, 2024
Rev. Van Kampen

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 71
Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 5:18, 21-31
Gospel Lesson: John 6:60-69
Sermon Text: Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

Grace to you and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord,
and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

God's Word for our consideration today is our Old Testament Lesson
from the book of Joshua, chapter twenty-four, verses one and two,
and then verses fourteen through eighteen.
This is the Word of our Lord.

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, and he
summoned the elders of Israel, its heads, its judges, and its officers,
and they presented themselves before God.

Then Joshua told all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of
Israel, has said.”...

Joshua said, “Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him
wholeheartedly and faithfully. Remove the gods that your fathers
served in the region across the River and in Egypt, and serve the
Lord. But if you see no benefit in serving the Lord, then choose for
yourselves today whomever you will serve – whether the gods that
your fathers served 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!”

The people responded by saying, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord in order to serve other gods! For the Lord our God, He is the One who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, where we were slaves. He is the One who performed these great signs right before our eyes and protected us on the whole journey that we made and among all the peoples through whom we passed. The Lord drove out of our presence all the peoples and the Amorites who were living in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because He is our God!”

So far the Word of our Lord. These are your words, Heavenly Father. Sanctify us by your Truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen

Looking back, it was one of the most beautiful things in all of my ministry. Two of my parishioners, Ray and Nancy, were celebrating their forty-fifth wedding anniversary, and they had asked me to renew their wedding vows. It was just a beautiful afternoon. We had gathered in the church, and Ray and Nancy were standing there. Ray was in his light blue suit, and Nancy in her dress. They were holding hands and smiling, as they are standing before the Lord's Altar. It was beautiful to see them like that, with their family watching from the pews.

But, what was even more beautiful was to hear them say the words of those promises, each to each other. *“I Ray”, and “I Nancy,” “in the presence of God, and these witnesses, renew my promise to you to love, and to be faithful to you, as long as we both shall live.”*

How beautiful is that to see a couple who has been married for forty-five years restate those promises?

When you think about why it is that couples decide to do this, why married couples decide to renew their vows, they do it for all kinds

of various reasons. But, when you 'boil it all down' it comes down to this. Now and then, it is worth revisiting the promises we have made. Now and then, it is worth renewing those commitments we made before God, and to each other. It is worth it, now and then, to do that, and to not only look back at all of the blessings, but it is also worth having that fresh start sometimes, isn't it?

We are at the end of August. We are at the start of another school year, here at Holy Cross. We just had a full week of school Monday through Friday. Other kids, if you go to other schools, maybe you are going to start school next week, or after Labor Day. Parents, you are getting back into your Fall routines. And, even if you don't have any kids at home at all, that are school age, or you don't have kids to worry about, you still have that feeling that it is time for Summer to be over, and to get back into that Fall routine. You maybe are at the point, too, where you look back at the last few months and say, "*You know, I could use a fresh start, too.*" We could all use a fresh start. And so, what better place to get that fresh start than right here, in God's House. What better place to get that fresh start? What better time is there to get that fresh start, than right now? What better opportunity do we have than to lift our voices, and join with all of God's people in saying,

"We will serve the Lord!"

Since the Lord has graciously chosen us as His people, we will serve the Lord. As we remember His faithfulness to us, we renew our faithfulness to Him.

First of all, we consider God's faithfulness to us. When you think about Ray and Nancy, or any other couple renewing their wedding vows, put yourself in their shoes for a minute. Just imagine what are the thoughts running through your mind, as you are saying the words of those promises again? What are you thinking about? You are thinking about the good times. You are remembering the blessings. You are remembering the ways this person has loved me, and cared

for me. It is the same when we remember our Lord, too, when we come to Him, and want that fresh start. The reason we can do it is because we remember His faithfulness to us.

It is interesting that Joshua begins, (*And this is really Joshua's final speech, his final sermon. This is kind of the last time he is going to address the entire nation of Israel*), he begins by saying,

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, has said.”...

Then, I am going to read a couple of verses that are not included in what I read a minute ago. He begins his speech by saying this.

“From ancient times...” He is speaking the Word of the Lord.

“From ancient times your ancestors, including Terah, who was the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and they served other gods.”

Imagine being an Israelite, and hearing those words. *“Hey, your ancestors did not always live here, and they did not always serve the Lord. Your ancestors actually served other gods.”*

It was a reminder that the Israelites really themselves had absolutely nothing to be proud of, in and of themselves. Not even their family history was something they could look to as a source of pride. Even Abraham himself came from a family that served other gods. They were no better than their idol worshiping neighbors. For the Israelites, they understood that not only were their ancestors no better than their neighbors, but they, themselves, were no better than their neighbors. Just that mention of idol worship, of serving other gods, must have been a like a dagger in their hearts, for the Israelites. They, themselves, knew their own history. They knew how they had worshiped that golden calf at Mt. Sinai, and how they had made offerings, and sacrifices to the Baal of Peor, with the Moabites. How many times they stubbornly doubted God's promises, and refused to do His Will. And yet, the Lord was faithful.

From that sentence, Joshua goes on, and says,

“From ancient times your ancestors served foreign gods, but I took Abraham from across the river.”

God, in an act of pure grace and mercy, chose Abraham out of all of those unbelieving, idol worshiping people for no special reason at all, other than it was His grace, and His plan. He chose Abraham to be the father of the Nation of Israel. He blessed Abraham and Sarah with offspring. He caused their family to grow into a great nation. Hundreds of years later, when that great nation was enslaved in Egypt, it was the Lord who had raised up Moses and Aaron to set His people free, bring them out of Egypt, and out of their slavery. It was the Lord who parted the waters of The Red Sea, and guided the Israelites on their journey to The Promised Land through the wilderness. It was the Lord who had driven out all of those opposing nations that stood in their way. It was the Lord who had done everything for them. In spite of their many sins, and in spite of all of the times they wandered away from God, God continued to do absolutely everything to rescue His people, and deliver them to The Promised Land.

And when you think about the story of God's faithfulness to Israel, that is the story of God in His relationship with us, too. We can't look back at our family history, and be proud of it, necessarily, even if you come from a long line of Christians in your family. If you go back far enough, you are going to find some pagan worshipping a tree somewhere. But even we, ourselves, it is not like we chose to have God in our lives. It is not like we decided that we were going to worship God, all on our own. Ever since Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the garden, we are, as human beings, born into this world spiritually dead, and enemies of God. We are incapable of coming to Him, incapable of believing in Him, incapable of choosing Him.

That's the point that Joshua makes, when he says,

“But if you see no benefit in serving the Lord, then choose for

yourselves this day whomever you will serve - whether the gods that your fathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.”

Without God, the only choice we have as simple human beings is, *“Which worthless idol are we going to serve?”*

And yet, the Lord, in spite of our unbelief, and in spite of our unfaithfulness, He is faithful to us. In Ephesians chapter one, it says that **“God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”** God chose you. God chose me. God chose all of us, and He did so in Christ. He chose us so that we could be holy, and blameless in His sight. In the Person of Jesus Christ, God chose to rescue us from our slavery to sin, once and for all, by offering up His own life on a cross, and then rising from the grave, so that through faith in Him, we can have eternal life. In the waters of your Baptism, Jesus Christ brings to you, personally, all of the things He won for you at the cross. He carries out that choice that is made from eternity. He brings you the forgiveness of all of your sins. He brings you the gift of the Holy Spirit. He plants His Holy Spirit in your heart to lead you out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of God's love and truth. He declares you holy and blameless. The Lord has done absolutely everything to rescue you, make you His child, and deliver you to His ultimate Promised Land, the Promised Land of Heaven. It is remembering that love and faithfulness of God that enables us to join the Children of Israel and say,

“We too will serve the Lord!”

They, themselves, recall all of the wonderful things God has done for them. That is what we do, too. We recognize that God is not just some generic god ruling over the world in some kind of arbitrary way. As the Children of Israel said, *“He is the LORD, our God. He is our God, the God who has done absolutely everything for us.”*

Moved by the Lord's love and faithfulness, then we renew our faithfulness in Him, our faithfulness to Him.

You listen to what Joshua says here. He calls on the Israelites: **“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him wholeheartedly and faithfully. Remove the gods that your fathers served in the region across the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.”**

When we think about what it means to serve the Lord, especially pay attention to those two words that Joshua says.

“...serve Him wholeheartedly and faithfully.”

When it comes to serving the Lord, ultimately what it comes down to is serving the Lord with an undivided heart, with a heart that is faithful to God, alone. Just as husband and wife desire to be faithful to each other alone, we as God's people want to serve Him alone. So, from time to time, that means renewing our own faithfulness to God. Sometimes you don't realize how far you have wandered off of the path, until you go, and look back. Like Joshua says when he talks about removing the gods. It is not like the Children of Israel were really carrying idols with them, necessarily at this time. They were probably not holding on to any physical things, but what God is talking about is taking those false gods out of our hearts. So, when you think about all of those things that can get in the way of your relationship with God that can cause your heart to have divided loyalty to God—*whether it is an idolatrous attitude we have, whether it is some tangible thing we want to hold on to no matter what, whether it is a boyfriend, or a girlfriend, whether it is a political candidate, or a political ideology, whether it is the desire for my own personal comfort, or greedy desire for wealth, whether it is the opinions that other people have about us*—when any of those things get in the way of your relationship with God, when those things become more important in your life than God, it is time to pull those things right out of our hearts, to make that same resolution Joshua makes, when he says, *“The rest of you can chose for yourselves which god you are going to serve, whether you are going to serve these gods over here, or those gods over there,*

But as for me and my household - we will serve the Lord!"

We will serve the Lord.

In the end, the choice is obvious isn't it? "Hmm? Let's see. I can either serve all of these other people's attitudes, and things that really aren't going to do any good for me in my life, and are actually going to put my salvation at risk, if I hold on to them. Or, I can serve the Lord. I can serve the God of all faithfulness. I can serve the God who has outdone absolutely everything for me in my life, who provides for all of my needs, who protects me each and every day, who sends His angels to watch over me, who has redeemed me from all of my sins, who has given me the very hope of eternal life!"

You are not going to sit there, and say to yourself, when you are faced with that choice, when you really think about that choice, you are not going to sit there, and say, "*I have to think about it.*" No. It is obvious. You listen to Peter in our Gospel reading for today.

When everybody else left Jesus, and abandoned Jesus, Peter and the twelve stuck around. They stayed behind to be with Jesus.

When Jesus questioned him on it, when He tested him on it, what did Peter say? He said,

"Lord, to whom will we go?

You have the words of eternal life."

Eternal life. How much more obvious can it be, right? And yet, as sinful human beings, we sure have a hard time missing out on the obvious. We have a hard time seeing the obvious. When you think back to the history of the Children of Israel, they are making this resolution to serve the Lord as a united nation. They say,

"We too will serve the Lord, for He is our God!"

Then, after this time, everybody disperses, and goes back to their own homes, and in a way, the people become kind of isolated from each other, isolated from worshiping God. And they become influenced by the other nations around them. And in the beginning of the book of Judges it says that instead of doing The Will of the

Lord, it says, **“Every man did what was right in his own eyes”**. It wasn't too long, it was only about a generation, until the Israelites were worshiping idols, again.

In many ways, we too can identify with that. We know what it is like to be isolated in today's world. In many ways we become isolated even from each other. We go back home to our lives, and we live our lives at home, and at work, very separately from our lives at church, a lot of times. It is very easy for us to be influenced by the pressures of this world, to think and do the way everybody else does. Before we know it, we are not just serving the Lord, but we are serving all kinds of other gods. That is where we come today, needing that fresh start.

I stand here today, and can tell you that you have that fresh start with your Lord. We can renew our commitment every time we gather here, and remember the great things God has done for us. The Lord we serve, the God we serve, is faithful.

The God we serve is faithful.

Christ is with us. He is comforting us. He is uplifting us. He is keeping us close to Himself in our faith, and in our life. Every time we hear His Word, every time we come before His altar and stand before His altar and receive His own body and blood that He shed as a payment for our sins, Jesus is giving us that fresh start, declaring to you the forgiveness He won, by perfectly serving the Lord in your place. It is only, only in the beauty of His grace, in the peace of His forgiveness, and in the hope of Heaven which He brings, that we too can join together, and say, **“We will serve the Lord!”** Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts, and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.