

People of Justice and Righteousness

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

The biblical story of Joshua is an exciting story of conquest, a testimony to faith, a statistical record, and a geography. It is also an account of God's covenant with God's people. After long years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites conquered the Promised Land. Bloody battles and numerous deceptions resulted in the Israelites' destruction of Canaanite power. The land was to be divided among the twelve tribes of Israel. In preparation for this historical event, Joshua gathered all the tribes at Shechem (a city of refuge that is not hostile to Israelites), bringing together the heads of the tribes, the judges of the people, and the officers of Israel. Then he asked them to be in relationship. "Long ago your ancestors...lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods," he said (v. 2). "Now therefore revere the LORD... put away the gods that your ancestors served...and serve the LORD" (v. 14).

The question of the people's allegiance arose in the midst of a crisis of choice between the God of justice and righteousness and the gods of the ancestors. Behind this crisis lay the old perspective that deities were limited geographically and that every land had its own gods. Joshua challenges the community to renounce allegiance to all these gods for the one God of justice and righteousness.

What does it mean to leave behind the ancestral gods and serve the one God of justice and righteousness? This may not be as easy as we might imagine. How we long to serve the gods of our ancestors, the gods on the other side of the river where we remember life was better! In the 1960s, the television show *Leave it to*

Beaver characterized such a life. Nuclear families prospered through the support of their fathers. Tidy homes flourished with abundant food, lovely flowers, and all-around happiness. Mothers were beautiful from morning to night. Those were the days when safety and plenty reigned. The gods of order and abundance held sway. America watched over and protected all the inhabitants of the land. All was right with the world.

The ancestral gods of the Israelite people provided many of the same benefits. Those gods guaranteed security and abundance to all who lived within their embrace. As the people discovered while they were wandering in the wilderness, slavery did not seem too high a price to pay for safety and prosperity.

The place of belonging, even if it is in bondage, may be better than wandering about, unsettled, homeless, hungry, and unknown. It would be difficult for the people to face a future in a new land with different promises, different expectations, different dreams, and a new understanding of God.

The covenant with the God of justice and righteousness is different from the worship of the ancestral gods. This one God of justice and righteousness is not simply a god of the land, of place, of prosperity. This one God of justice and righteousness is a God who travels with God's people. This God of justice and righteousness will be with them not only in their prosperity but also in their suffering and in their trials. This God of justice and righteousness does promise security and abundance. This God of justice and righteousness promises to be present through all that life brings. This God of justice and righteousness, is present with the people in birth, in death, in humiliation, in joy, in wandering, and in arrival. This God of justice and righteousness delights in the people and desires more than safety and plenty for them. This God of justice and righteousness desires for them new life.

The invitation to this covenant requires that these people will be loyal and faithful to this God who is with them. This covenant requires loyal relationship through all the situations of life, instead of looking for the god who will deliver the best benefits. **Susan Henry-Crowe**

For our time: the renewal of our covenantal relationship with God in worship, the affirmation of our identity as the people of God, and the faith commitment of service and obedience to the God of justice and righteousness.

At the threshold of entering the promised land and with the promise of a future home, Joshua reminded the people of the miracles by which the Lord gave birth to Israel in the call of Abraham and Sarah and especially called to mind their deliverance through the plagues of their Egyptian slave masters and escape from their chariots and horsemen, through the sea and out of the darkness the Lord put between the Israelites and the Egyptians (v. 7). With this affirmation of what the God of Israel had done, Joshua addressed the people with the instruction to fear the Lord, to serve him, and to forsake the other gods of ancient memory and now temptingly close at hand. "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua implored. Three times he repeats his imperative and claim with different nuance: first, the choice of the Lord above all other gods (vv. 14-15); second, the denial of their choice and service unless they recognize that God is jealous and holy, and so requires them to reject the idolatry of the nations (vv. 19-20); and third, the corporate accountability and their inclination of their hearts to the Lord (vv. 22-23). Joshua's sermon reminds the people that the redemption from Egypt and the gift of land and promise come with the covenant obligation to choose, fear, incline the heart to, serve, and obey the Lord.

Joshua's charge and affirmation are the foundation for the people's worship. Joshua required their public affirmation of loyalty to the Lord as witnesses against themselves (v. 22); he made a covenant with them "that day" (v. 25); he wrote the

words in the book of the law of God (v. 26); and he set the large stone of witness under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord at Shechem, where he called the people and himself to account (v. 27). These were components of the worship of Israel in which they affirmed the choice of the Lord who delivered them and the remaking of the covenant for the new day of land and promise. They marked the choice and renewal in their mutual accountability of witness against themselves, in the hearing of the words, the writing of the book of the law of God, and with the stone of witness in the sanctuary.

In our own day of global political uproar, unrest in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, violence in the homeland; theft, rape, murder, fights over politics (even though politicians make a promise to serve all the people they represent...) with people who hate for our political and economic policies, we need to look with faithful eyes for a fresh response to Joshua's sermon for renewal of the people, in covenanted, responsive obedience to God "above all earthly powers." Like Joshua, the covenant renewal reminds us of the unique miracles of the Lord for us that have experienced them and issue a call to forsake the false gods and insecurities in our common life, such as the love of North American wealth, the fear of terrorism, the fear of disease, the trust in military force instead of the other choices required for building up alienated and oppressed people. We all need to rediscover Joshua's way of single-minded loyalty to the Lord, the obedient refusal to give ourselves over to the temptations of compromise with the great wealth, powers, and fears that enthrall most people and all nations today. **Charles E. Raynal**

As the fantasy life portrayed in *Leave it to Beaver* illustrates, nostalgia may be one of the best ways to sniff out these gods. When people reminisce about "the old gods"—the ones who presided over the ways things used to be—what do they say they miss? By contrast, the passage from Joshua asks the people to leave the old

gods on the other side of the river in favor of the one God of justice and righteousness who is with us no matter where we go.

In Joshua, at least, the covenant was made. God chose the people and the people promise to be faithful to the covenant. Recognizing the one God who has been with them all the way, they declare: "Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God" (v. 18). **Susan Henry-Crowe**

Today we have the same choice to make...chose this day whom we will serve....can we affirm: "Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God." And we will strive to be people of justice and righteousness.

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