

Joshua 24: 1 – 3(a), 14-25
A Challenging Choice : by Rev. Allan Baker
Newtonbrook United Church – November 9, 2008



“Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region 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 choices that we make in life are all very interesting, are they not? Some of the choices challenge us to travel the Road Less Travelled²; to serve a God rather than the gods – spelled with a small “g”.

Honestly, I am becoming tired of thinking about God. Is there anyone else here who is tired of thinking about God? How much time and energy can we invest in thinking about what is an “inexhaustible mystery”³? Rather than thinking about God, I’d rather be experiencing God. I believe that the message that God may be attempting to communicate to us through these words in the Book of Joshua is one of how we can serve the God who loves creation – and all of us - in our lives, and through that service, experience God being present in our lives.

First, some background information:

The Book of Joshua is an idealized history of the settlement of the people of Israel in “The Promised Land”, that is the territory that was called Canaan. There is a possibility that the history of the settlement of North America by Europeans has been written in a similar manner.

In short, the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan River and settled in a land where the socio-economic system of the Canaanite city-states concentrated power in the upper classes to the detriment of the peasants. The Israelite tribes that entered Canaan had experienced a great liberation from this type of society when they had been liberated from Egypt. *“The Book of Joshua is the story of how an obedient Israel under God’s chosen leader can bring into existence a society based on justice and freedom.”*⁴

¹ Joshua 24:15

² This is the title of a book by M. Scott Peck

³ Ted Schmidt, *Journeys to the Heart of Catholicism*, p. 95

⁴ Oxford Annotated Bible, 1991, page 270

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How different is that from our society today where there is a growing gap between those who have, and those who have in excess? I believe that this is one of the stories in the Bible that is relevant to our lives in the 21st century.

The people of Israel entered a society and the first 12 chapters of the Book of Joshua are a story of conquest – a very bloody story. It could be the story of an invading army in the Congo, in the Caucasus, or in Iraq today. The society that the Israelites subdued had a religious life of its own – one that was in contrast to the monotheism of the people of Israel. In our reading today Joshua has gathered the tribes of Israel together for his farewell address and he challenges the people to make a choice – “***choose this day whom you will serve***”⁵

One of the choices is to worship, “***the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living.***” We too are living in a land where people worship other gods, are we not?

One of the small “g” gods present in the world today is **the god of economic growth**. This is the god whose creed says that the economy must grow continually. The anxiety of the governing elite today is about an economy that has stopped growing. On October 22nd, when he was talking to a group here at Newtonbrook, past Moderator Bill Phipps said that the current turmoil shows that The Market is not god – borrowing a phrase from Harvard theologian Harvey Cox.

Have you ever thought about how un-natural the idea of continual economic growth is? We, as people, grow to a certain size; trees grow to a certain size; even the grass on our lawn, if we left it alone, would reach a maximum size. Maybe this is the time to transform the debate and discuss the concept of limits to growth? How much more economic growth can the world’s environment afford? While General Motors may want everyone to have a car, what would the air be like if that happened?

What gives us the privilege of having a car, and denying that privilege to our sisters and brothers in India, or China?

Another small “g” god in this time is **the god of war**. This god has been with us as human beings for a long time. In Roman mythology, Mars was the god of war. The ancient Grecian culture named Ares as the god of war. Has the Empire named a god of war for us in these times?

In the 20th century war became a business and the development of the technology of war meant that civilians – innocent people who neither supported nor engaged in war - became targets. Millions died in World War One, followed by more millions in World War Two; followed by the Korean War; and the Viet Nam war, and many other wars. During the cold war the diversion of public money and talented engineers and scientists to serve the military machine robbed hundreds of millions of God’s children of an abundant life.

⁵ Joshua 24:15

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Rather than finance a war in Afghanistan - *and does anyone believe that a downturn in federal government revenues will mean that we will have to bring some of our troops home because we can no longer afford them being in Afghanistan?* - Canada could be building affordable housing both here and abroad, feeding the hungry at home and abroad, and moving towards meeting our international commitment of donating **0.7 per cent of our national GNP** to nations like Haiti and Zimbabwe. The god of war is diverting our resources from providing a better life for God's children.

Growth, war – there are other small “g” gods – these are the gods of the people of the land where we were living. It is just like life in the days of Joshua, no? Our God is a God of peace and justice; a God of LOVE!

When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?⁶

As I said earlier, I am tiring of thinking about God. I agree with Marcus Borg when he writes that, ***“How we think about God matters.”***⁷ I have shelves of books ABOUT GOD, written by some of our most profound Christian intellectuals. As a part of the United Church of Canada we have been thinking about God for a long time, but have we been SERVING GOD and EXPERIENCING GOD?

Some of the people who I have read on church growth indicate that mainline churches think about God, while criticizing the “thin theology” of the growing communities of faith. Attendees in the latter congregations more frequently speak of experiencing God in spirited worship.

My favourite words that I heard in an interview with the American author **John Updike** are: ***“God is in the world, just like salt is in the sea.”***

I saw that God on Wednesday morning.

As I was arriving here at this building, four of our guests were gathered outside, having an intimate experience with the god of tobacco.

“How’s the hand Allan?” was the first question.

Karen Armstrong, an author who has done much thinking about God, says that one of the marks of Christianity, Judaism, Islam is the worship of the God who **demonstrates compassion**⁸. Religious experience, she writes, must be woven into all of life. It is not a Sabbath inspiration for Christians, Jews, or Muslims. Our guests demonstrated compassion.

I saw God on Thursday afternoon.

⁶ Where Have All The Flowers Gone? Music by Pete Seeger.

⁷ Borg, The God We Never Knew, 1997, Preface

⁸ Karen Armstrong, A History of God, p. 44/45

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I was walking back to the church building from a visit at Cummer Lodge. There is a man in a wheelchair who I have often seen on the sidewalk on the south side of Cummer, near Willowdale Manor. He was there enjoying the sunshine on Thursday. This is a man without any legs. I stopped to talk. It was a holy time. We didn't talk for long, but I felt that I had been touched by God's Spirit when I finished that short conversation.

I saw God on Thursday morning.

I walked into a group of quilters, who were laughing and talking as their fingers wove needle and thread through a pattern of cloth. This cloth is destined to become a quilt for someone else. Being together, working on a common project, and knowing that their skills and talents will help someone else is one way that these women are SERVING others.

Joshua; *but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*

In our United Church New Creed, we affirm that our purpose is to “*love and serve others.*”

In Newtonbrook's new Mission Statement, we affirm that our purpose as a congregation involves:

“Worshipping, learning (and) actively serving ... as a caring, open and welcoming Christian community”

When she writes about the Call of the prophet Isaiah, Karen Armstrong indicates that, “*the point of this vision was not to enlighten the prophet, but to give him a practical job to do.*”⁹

I believe that God calls us to serve one another – and that is where we meet God, and that is where our spirits are nurtured. Saint Francis of Assisi provides us with wisdom: *it is in giving that we receive.*

The stories of Jesus tell us that we are all part of one family; that we are to love God, with all our heart, soul and strength, and to love one another as we love ourselves. We express that love by making the choice that Joshua made:

as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Singing: “Wondrous Music” by Tania Miller, Conductor, Victoria Symphony Orchestra

⁹ Karen Armstrong, A history of God, p. 42

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Prayers for God's Family and Creation:

Loving God,
Creator of all that is, Spirit of life and love;
We pray for peace in your world;

for the victims of violence everywhere;

for those who are engaged in the struggle for peace with justice;

and for a world without war and violence;

God, hear our prayer, and in your love answer.

Lead us God, from death to life,
from falsehood to truth;
from despair to hope;
from fear to trust;
may peace fill our beings, your world, and your universe.

We bring to you this morning our prayers for the Rev. Ellen Redcliffe who presided at the funeral of Pat Chatwell yesterday, and for Pat's family and friends.

We also pray for Cameron Coupland who is presently serving with the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, **and** for the people of that land. May they all have peace with justice.

Caring God, you know the prayers that are written on our hearts.

We take a moment of silence to listen for your prayers for us.

quiet time

All this we pray in the awareness that you sent Jesus to show us the way of peace. **Amen.**

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