

Looking over the River, and Making the Choice...Again

Joshua 24:14-25

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The book of Joshua is long, and filled with stories, some of them glorious, some of them harrowing. The people of Israel sometimes walked in the ways of the Lord, and as often as not, strayed. They received the care of the Lord, and they received the wrath of God, often in equal measure.

As they come to the end of the book, Joshua, who labored with them long, who walked with them, who reprimanded them, who coddled them and cared for them, who pled their case before God – Joshua comes to the end of the book with a challenge – a challenge and a choice – a challenge, a choice, and a vow. Joshua offered them a challenge about whom they would choose to serve, and revealed his own choice – For me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

The people of Israel were at Shechem when this took place. This is important because centuries of religious ritual had occurred at Shechem. Covenants were made there, and renewed there. Abram, and then Abraham, sacrificed to the Lord there. Jacob was active there, and Shechem was the site of Jacob's well, where Jesus met the Samaritan woman. The sons of Jacob met at Shechem. and here, the people of Israel gather with Joshua.

Shechem is at a geographical and a theological crossroads. It is set in the valley between two mountains, and on the River Jordan. It is a natural meeting place, a place where people who are different come together. Shechem is a place where different ideas about life and faith coexist. It is not surprising, given the setting, that Shechem plays such a large role in the biblical text. People come there – lives and understandings interface – and people leave Shechem changed. Shechem was a place for covenant making, confession of covenant breaking, and covenant renewal.

We might ask -- Why does a covenant require renewal? Why isn't making that large promise one time enough?

Well, of course, this is because some of those making the promise, making the vow, are, in most cases, human, and thus, prone to failure, prone to wandering, prone to straying from the path. So the choice must be taken up, certainly the first time, in a large ceremony, and again and again and again, as people come to an awareness again, and again and again of how many times the choice is before us – to serve God or to serve other gods.

This does not surprise. Human relationships, between spouses, between parents and children, even between friends and members of a congregation or denomination – these require care, and thought, and attention – and renewal.

There are times that one has to make a daily choice to stay in relationship, to keep working on the relationship, to realize what is there, and what is not there, and to commit to making it work, and making it work better.

This is the kind of commitment to which Joshua calls the people of Israel. Did you notice that he did not take yes for an answer easily? No, he challenged their facile yes, reminding them of how difficult this was going to be, encouraging them to keep in mind that they should not enter this commitment lightly – that no matter how well they had come to this moment, no matter how many barriers had been crossed, no matter how much hard work and achievement it had taken --

There would STILL be challenges. STILL there would be temptations. STILL there would be times when the going was hard , and they would be tired, and sick of trying, and entirely fed up with the call to be counter cultural and to move outside their comfort and comfortable zone.

And in those times, they would have to remember that God is a jealous God, who demands allegiance – not an easy yes, but a thoughtful commitment that they would be called to make, and remake, and renew again and again.

I just came back from a conference on the Accra Confession. It is a document written in 2004 that speaks of the relationship between people in rich countries and poor countries, and our relationship, all of us, with God's creation. Part of the meeting was devoted to discussion of what was missing in the original document – what had the drafters missed or omitted – how the view from 2014 of the global economy and its impact on people and the earth was different than the view the drafters had in 2004.

As we were discussing this, a number of people involved in the drafting project in 2004 were in the room, and some of those people became somewhat defensive. It became clear that they were not altogether ready to have their work challenged, or critiqued, or improved. One of the drafters said, in this emotionally tense moment, that the meeting in Accra, Ghana in 2004, and his participation in drafting the document was the high point – the ultimate high point – of his faith journey, a moment of true transformation. He said he'd never forgotten how he felt there, and we all needed to take care – be careful – and remember what that was like – how important that moment was – as we critiqued what he saw as the emblem of a precious and wondrous time for his relationship with God.

Have you ever taken part in a meeting where people get defensive about work they have done?
Have you ever taken part in a meeting like that in the church?

Work we have done in the church, work we have done for God, is important to us. And so the places and spaces where people have made covenant – these places can be tender and touchy for people.

During the coffee break after this discussion, as participants were trying to think through what this defensive reactivity was about on the part of the drafters – after all, this part of the meeting, this critique of what had been missed and what needed to be improved – this had been on the published agenda for some time. We all knew that it was coming – so why were they so danged defensive?

As we were discussing this over coffee, Allan Boesak, who served as one of the primary drafters of the Belhar Confession, which was written in 1982 in South Africa, told a story. He was at a meeting in recent years where the Belhar, his work, was being discussed. He told us that there was a moment when he was not particularly listening to the discussion on the table. He was shuffling papers and trying to find a document, preparing for the next piece that was to come.

And it was at that point, when he was not particularly listening, that someone rose and took the floor with a critical tone of voice in which she spoke his name aloud – at which point he said, he realized he'd better listen!

And the speaker said that she had reflected a long time on this, and she really was struck that Allan Boesak, who is an internationally recognized theologian and leader of the church – she couldn't believe, she said, that Allan Boesak missed a key point in the drafting of the Belhar Confession. She was upset that it doesn't address gender, or women, or their struggles, which are legion. In fact, women are not mentioned in the entire document.

At first, Allan recalled, he was really angry. He said he thought to himself, Who are YOU to challenge my work? Don't you SEE the good done by this work? Don't you UNDERSTAND how important this work is? And by the way, don't you UNDERSTAND how important I AM?????

But Allan told us that after he calmed down, he realized that she was right. They hadn't thought of women at all. In a context where violence against women was so common, so normal; in a context where women would often die in childbirth, and where the birthrate resulted in early death for many women – that the burden of apartheid and its cruelty fell on women and girls in a particularly difficult way, in the form of sexual assault – which has been part of every human struggle the world has ever known, even the taking of Canaan, which the Israelites were remembering when they gathered at Shechem.

This group of pastors and theologians who drafted the Belhar Confession were so focused on what they saw as the issues that needed to be raised, that they missed the suffering of women, particularly women of color, across South Africa. This realization led him to thinking and writing about the Belhar Confession and about life and ministry in South Africa and among Christians quite differently.

Allan was called to renewal. He was called on the carpet, as it were – called to reflect, to renew his understanding, to once again commit himself to the work of justice for all – not just those whom he and the drafting committee had considered originally, but to expand his view, to see what he had not before, and to realize that there was more to do. In conclusion, Allan told us that he realized that day that the work of following Jesus is not a decision we can make one time and be done.

The work of confessing faith in God is not a decision we can make one time and be done. There are always things we miss, people we miss, concerns we miss.

Even when we are not intentional about deciding to go awol with our commitments, even when we aren't going to Vegas because what happens there stays there – even when we don't involve ourselves in rape, or murder, or adultery, or theft – even then, we find so often that our vision is so limited, our understanding so weak, our capacity so feeble – that we stray without meaning to. We find ourselves far off the path and we wonder how we got there.

And we realize that you don't have to go to Vegas, to need a return trip to Shechem.

We don't have to make a campaign of sin, to need a moment to return to God.

The people of Israel were called to a holy place, where peoples and religious understandings and faith journeys have intersected for century upon century. And they were called, at the end of a forty year period of wilderness wandering, a forty-year journey in their relationship with God, which was not altogether pretty, in which they strayed and sinned, and lost their way, again and again and again.

They were called to look over the river, and choose God – not once – rather, to commit and covenant to choose God, again and again and again.

We are surrounded by many gods and we are called to choose daily, regularly whom we will serve. May we have the power, and the strength, and be given the grace to choose – this day, and the next, and the next, and every one that follows, to claim that for us and for our households – we will serve the Lord.