



**Southwestern Minnesota Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

### **Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18**

<sup>1</sup>Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2a</sup>And Joshua said to all the people, <sup>14</sup>“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup>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.”

<sup>16</sup>Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup>for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; <sup>18</sup>and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

## Sermon by Rev. Kathryn Skoglund, Synod Minister

***Sunday, Aug. 22, 2021***

I'm sure you've seen them, either in Christian bookstores, or online, or in people's homes. Perhaps you even have one yourself. I'm talking about those plaques that say “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”.

It's a bold statement. One that leaves no doubt about the allegiance of the person who has displayed this sentiment. This person believes in God, and their loyalty and devotion will remain firm. No matter what happens, no matter what other gods or temptations come along, they will trust in and serve God—without fail.

That's the claim Joshua makes in today's first lesson from the Hebrew Bible. And it's the claim the rest of the people make when given the choice between the God of Israel and the gods their ancestors worshipped before them, back in the old country.

It seems an easy choice to make doesn't it? Especially based on their recent experiences, which they eagerly recite to defend their decision: escape from Egypt and freedom from slavery, signs and wonders performed right before their very eyes, protection from their enemies, and the gift of the land taken from the Amorites: the very land on which they stand as they make their profession of steadfast faith. With all these wonderful things God has done for them, of course they are going to choose the one true God. Why wouldn't they? It's a no brainer.

So there they stand: they've staked their claim in their new home, they've vowed their allegiance, and they all lived happily ever after. Here ends the reading. Amen.

But, the thing is, the reading doesn't really end there, which is a problem: a problem which becomes clear in the very next verse. "But Joshua said 'You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a Holy God...'"

And I'm sure when they heard that, they were shocked, appalled, and probably very offended. And I'll bet, in their hearts they were all the more determined to prove him wrong. "Well of course we will. Just you wait and see! We will serve the Lord!"

But for all their good intents, for all their determination and heartfelt promises, Joshua was absolutely right-they couldn't do it. They could not serve the Lord.

That hard truth becomes evident right away. In the very 1st chapter of the book of Judges the people disobeyed God. They couldn't keep their promise to set everything else aside and serve the Lord. They put their own self interests ahead of God's commands. They served themselves not the Lord.

Not just once, but over and over again, through Judges, and Kings, all the prophets, and all through the other books of the Bible, even up to the Gospel reading we have today. When things got too difficult, or they became too frightened, or they thought God was acting too slowly, or not acting at all they turned away. It got to be predictable. So much so that when Jesus' teachings became too confusing or hard to accept for some of his listeners, Jesus turned to his closest disciples and asked, "what about you? Are you going to turn away now too?"

And Peter responds, "Alleluia, Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life alleluia!" Or something to that effect. Which is really his version of "as for me and my brothers, we will serve you Lord."

But they can't do it either. When push comes to shove and Jesus needs them most, Peter denies him, the others run away abandoning him. They just don't have it in them to keep their promise of steadfast devotion.

And we can point our fingers and shake our heads in judgment against the Israelites and then the disciples, but we shouldn't be so hard on them, because we can't do it either. Despite our plaques and our proclamations and our very best efforts, we can't serve the Lord either, not the way we want to, not the way we should. It just isn't in us, any of us.

I mean think about it, how many times have you broken one of the 10 commandments? Let's look at a couple and see how you fare. Number 7: You shall not steal. Okay, well, that's not so hard to keep. Except when you look at Luther's explanation of what it means—we are to fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbors' money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals but instead *help them to improve and protect their money and income*.

Well, that makes it a little trickier. Or how about another one: Number 8: you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Ok, so you probably don't go around telling outright lies about people, but, as Luther explains, you also shouldn't betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light. Then it turns into a more grey area doesn't it?

Now here's an easy one. Number 5: you shall not murder. Well, I'm pretty sure I've kept that one my whole life, and don't plan on breaking it any time soon. But, then, Luther adds this: we are to fear and love God so that we neither endanger, nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead *help and support them in all of life's needs*.

No matter how hard we try, we can't live up to the standards God sets for us.

Paul describes our failure in his letter to the Romans. From the Message translation, chapter 7 vs 15-24:

<sup>15</sup> What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. <sup>16</sup> So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. <sup>17</sup> But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! <sup>18</sup> I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. <sup>19</sup> I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. <sup>20</sup> My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. <sup>21</sup> It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. <sup>22</sup> I truly delight in God's commands, <sup>23</sup> but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. <sup>24</sup> I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

That is the question isn't it? And doesn't Paul describe our predicament perfectly?

So then what do we do? Do we just throw our hands in the air and give up? Stop even trying because we can't do it anyway? Throw away our plaques and take back our promises because there is no hope for us anyway?

No! Absolutely not! Because Paul gives us the answer to his question, "Is there no one who can do anything for us?" He tells us:

*<sup>25</sup> The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.*

We can't do it, but God can and that's where our hope lies. Our hope isn't in the choices we make, our hope is in the one who chooses us. Our hope and salvation doesn't depend on what we do or don't do; it depends upon what God did and what God continues to do for us.

Joshua gave the people a choice: serve the gods of your ancestors or the one true God of Israel, and they chose to serve the Lord. But when they failed over and over and over again, God chose them over and over and over and over again. Then God finally sent Jesus who continues what God started, who chose us and continues to choose us, in all our failures and sins, bringing us hope, and life and salvation: everything we so desperately need, and can't achieve in our own.

So don't throw away your plaques of Joshua's claim, but rather than using it as a bold statement of fact, think of it as a reminder, an encouragement of what you aspire to do as for me and my house we will (continue to do our best to) serve the Lord. And then right next to it put another plaque that more truthfully states what is really going on: "And God said, as for me and my Son, we will save the world."