

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Promises To Build On: Witness

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Sunday, November 12, 2023

Rev. Max Vincent, Senior Pastor

Today is our commitment day, and I want to begin by thanking those who committed to serve in our armed forces. Let's give thanks for our veterans today.

Veterans Day was November 11th. Initially, November 11th was known as Armistice Day, marking the armistice to end World War I, which was signed on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. After World War II, the day was changed to Veteran's Day to honor all those who have served in our armed forces.

My father spent 26 years in the military. I remember him talking once about taking the oath each time he would reenlist. He said the oath took on new meaning each time because of what he had learned and experienced in the years since he last took it. Though the words he uttered were the same, he found each time he spoke them, they took on new significance. Towards the end of his career, he learned that the words of the army oath, were only slightly changed from those adopted by the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War. So, he found the words connecting him to those veterans of previous generations as well.

Dad's story about the oath of enlistment reminded me of something one of the pastors who presided over our wedding shared with us. The pastor said, "When you utter your vows, you'll mean them, but there is so much going on today, so many things flooding your mind, you may not stop to ponder them today. But the next time you are attending a wedding, and you hear these words uttered by another couple, they will take on new meaning because you have spoken them to each other and because of what you have experienced since you first uttered them. You'll still mean them, but it will be like you recommit to them in that moment. Just like when you remember this day on your anniversary, you will mean these words anew each year."

This morning's second scripture reading is an oath the people of Israel make to serve the Lord. They are words of promise similar to those they have spoken before and

to promises that earlier generations made to serve God. The text is from Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25:

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. ² And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

¹⁴ "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. ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ 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."

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after

having done you good.”²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!”²² Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.”²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”²⁴ The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

When Joshua says, “Choose you this day whom you will serve,” he is at Shechem. Joshua and the Israelites have been here before. In chapter 8, after they first come into the land of promise, Joshua gathers the people of Israel at this same spot. They made a covenant there to serve the Lord. In chapter 24, Joshua is old and close to death. So, he gathers the people back at this place and asks them to renew that earlier promise, “Choose you this day whom you will serve?”

Shechem is a spot where their ancestors had also gathered to make promises to God. When Abram first came into the land, he stopped at Shechem and built an altar there to the God who called him to leave his home and his country. It was the first place he stopped and worshipped God in the land of promise. Later, Jacob, one of Abram’s grandsons, came to Shechem and built an altar dedicated to God.

Jacob had been raised in this country but fled to the land of his ancestors after stealing his father’s blessing from his brother Esau. Afraid that Esau was going to kill him, Jacob escaped to his uncle Laban. There, Jacob married two of Laban’s daughters, Rachel and Leah. When Jacob and his family decided to go back to the land of promise, Rachel stole her father’s idols. Jacob buried those idols at Shechem when he built his altar there for the worship of God. It was a sign that he and his family were dedicating themselves to worship God alone. They were not content merely with the promise of their ancestor to serve the Lord, and they were declaring that they would serve the Lord alone.

As Joshua gathers the Israelites of his day to renew their promises, he reminds them that this is a place where their ancestors have dedicated themselves solely to serve God. It is also the place where they have made similar promises. But the question is, who

will you choose to serve this day?

Serve, that word weaves in and out of this exchange between Joshua and the people of Israel. It’s used over 14 times in this text. Our ancestors served other gods in their homeland. The question is, who and how are you going to serve? Will you serve the gods of our ancestors or the God who brought you to the land of promise? Will you serve with all that you are and as long as you are? Joshua is not content with their initial promise. He says, “I’m not sure you understand this commitment. Are you sure you want to and will continue to serve this God?” Each time the people echo back, we will serve the Lord.

Shechem is a spot of dedication and renewed dedication. This scene reminds us of our need to remind ourselves of our commitment to God. It reminds us that we cannot be content with the promise our ancestors made, or even the promise we once made, but we have to choose on the given day.

In the days of the early church, when someone joined the church, they were asked to recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed. That affirmation of faith was seen as a declaration to serve the Lord and no other God. The words grew out of the simple affirmation, “Jesus is Lord.” Many early Christians said that because they uttered “Jesus is Lord” in worship, they could not speak the words “Caesar is Lord.” Many early Christians found they could not make promises to serve the emperor or the empire, to take oaths of office or service other than to serve the Lord.

In worship, they would recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed week after week as a way to remind themselves of these promises and to rededicate themselves to serve God. Today, when we recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed, we are saying words that Christians have recited for over 16 centuries.

We all have fond memories of the places where we made initial promises to serve God. Maybe it was at a camp like Camp Glisson. Perhaps that promise was made during a church service or on a youth retreat. We may remember the first time we made the promises to be a member of the church and support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Perhaps we remember the time we uttered those promises in joining this congregation.

These times and places are special memories of our lives. They are markers of our commitment to serve the Lord. There are also reminders we make along the way, witnesses to our devotion to God.

Today, we are asking you to remember and renew your promises to support the mission and ministry of God through your support of the church with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We build on promises that have been made before as we move forward in God's service.

Thanks be to God.



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