

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16A  
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18  
Psalm 34:15-22  
Ephesians 6:10-20  
John 6:56-69

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There is not much to appreciate about this global pandemic, especially these days as the delta variant surges and our hearts go out to those who are ill, their families, and our over-taxed health care workers. As our schools prepare to open and so much is unclear about arrangements for our children's health and learning. It is tempting to despair. But instead this morning I invite us to reflect on one opportunity this difficult situation does bring – it brings the opportunity to reset. The opportunity to reevaluate old patterns of life and reinvest our energy in what is truly important – which means for us Christians, deepening our trust and commitment toward God.

I've been hearing many people across our culture express this urge to reassess and recommit. On the one hand, people are exhausted from over a year of COVID stress. We are tapped out and ready for change. On the other hand, effective vaccines are giving us reason to look cautiously ahead toward new freedoms that will be coming, in good time. People are beginning to make intentional decisions about how they will begin again.

Our next door neighbor has decided to put her house on the market. She's in her 70's, and living alone through pandemic made her realize she doesn't have the energy to maintain a large home any more. She's looking for a smaller place in a retirement community, and she's finding new meaning in lightening up, letting go of 40 years of accumulated possessions. She says with conviction, "It's time."

The family across the street will soon be moving too. The pandemic made them realize the importance of family relationships and intentionally parenting as a team to bring up their two young daughters. The husband has accepted a new job in a smaller city, closer to grandparents, with hours that are better suited to being a dad. It's a chance for their family to reset and reinvest.

Some people are reconsidering their lifelong professions. A math teacher said last spring she was sure she would have to quit teaching. Her spirit was withering as remote learning took away everything she loved about working with young people. But then, this summer, she taught a summer school class with some tough kids who responded to her help. She received that positive experience as God's gift, and she gained the strength to try again. This fall she has a new position and a renewed sense of purpose.

Another family has been evaluating their own economic privilege during this pandemic, as so many others are losing jobs and struggling financially. They are now actively sharing their monetary wealth with people whose situation is more tenuous. It's a choice born out of their faith—blessed with abundance, they are convinced that God calls them to share.

We are not the same people we were before the pandemic, and our choices reflect it. When you come through a season of trauma, it is right to reevaluate and reinvest. To clarify your values. What kind of person you aspire to be. Who you will be accountable to, and whose calling will guide your decisions. This has been true for God's people throughout time.

Today we read the story of Joshua from three thousand years ago (around 1250 BCE). It was a moment of truth. Joshua stood before the people of Israel and called them to reinvest in their commitment to the One God.

After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, they had just taken possession of the Promised Land, and the twelve tribes were getting ready to go their separate ways, each to their own areas to settle and build a new life. Joshua challenged them, *"Choose this day whom you will serve!"* You can serve the Lord Yahweh, the One God, or you can serve the pagan gods people worship in this new land, or you can serve the old gods from the place you lived before. Choose as you wish. *"But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."*

It was a watershed moment. The people solemnly took stock of where they stood – and they were literally standing on land God had guided them to. They remembered who had brought them out of Egypt and saved them from slavery and protected them all those years, through the trauma and transition. They committed themselves to stay faithful to the One God in this new land. It would not be easy. They'd been tempted away before, like when Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, and it wasn't long before the people made a golden calf for pagan worship. So when they stood before Joshua and pledged themselves to the One God, we shouldn't imagine it was a once and done deal. Scholars believe the Israelites made it a practice to repeat these words in a ritual on many later occasions, as time went on. As challenges came, they had to promise again and again: *As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

In the same way, you and I need to regularly renew our commitment to God. That could be why so many Christians display these words from Joshua in their homes, whether it's in cross stitch or calligraphy or on a ceramic plaque or mug. They put these words in a

place where they can see them often and remember, and pledge again: *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

At our particular moment in time, this calling rings true for each of us, and for our congregation too. In terms of pandemic, we are not out of the woods yet. We are not yet settled in this new land, this new era we are all navigating together. But as we go to build a foundation for the future, we know for sure that loyalty to the One God will be our bedrock. Communion with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be at the heart of who we are and what we stand for, no matter what circumstances may come.

Like Joshua, Jesus called his followers to a moment of decision. When he challenged them to leave the past behind and follow God’s path, some got cold feet and fell away. So Jesus took the twelve disciples aside and put the choice before them; “Do you also want to go away?” And Peter spoke up for everyone with a response so powerful it’s become a part of our worship liturgy: *“Lord, to who can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* Nothing can replace what we have in relationship to God. Nothing else can anchor our hearts and center our lives, nothing else can ground us in love and grace and hope and courage like communion with Christ and life in relationship with God who made us.

This is the life that truly is life. Life full of joy and hope and love. Life built on forgiveness and compassion. Life that honors the dignity of all human beings and boldly pursues justice for every person. Life that honors the sacredness of everything God has created, and tends the animals, plants, rocks, trees, air and water God has entrusted to our care.

Every Sunday is an opportunity to renew our commitment to following Christ. That’s why it’s so important that we keep this ritual of worship each week. We come together in worship because when we do not, it is easy to become untethered from our Living God. Easy to forget how alive God is, even in this world of pandemic – how God is constantly healing, loving, supporting, prodding, forgiving, renewing and guiding. It is easy to forget how near God’s help is – as near as our breath -- so that we do not have to be ruled by worry and fear, we can be anchored in prayer and hope born out of God’s love for all people, across all divisions, and through all difficulties.

Renewing our commitment to God is solemn and important but not something to be approached in guilt or fear. It is meant to happen with a spirit of trust and eagerness. We can do it with any moment of silence, we can pause to take a deep breath in the morning or anytime, and affirm our intention: *Lord, I am your person. Claimed by you forever. Live in me, and let me live your love.*

And here's the real beauty of it. It does not truly depend on our own strength of will. It does not depend on our own virtue. We are only able to commit to God, because God has first made a commitment to us. Long before we had any say in the matter ourselves, God claimed us as God's beloved children. God has given us a place in God's family forever. And God will never leave us alone.

Every time we come to the table of Holy Communion we have the opportunity to renew and be renewed in relationship to our Creator. As we share the bread and wine, we experience the close and real presence of Jesus Christ. As we take Christ's body and blood into ourselves, we become part of who Christ is, part of all that Christ is about. We come to Christ's table for comfort, and we also receive strength to "serve this day" in God's name.

Speaking with a pastor in eastern Oregon this week, I learned that divisions are running deep out there. A member of their church works in a restaurant, and she wears a mask to work. One day a man yelled at her, cursed her out, because she was wearing that mask. Sometimes it feels like people are just going crazy. But in that eastern Oregon congregation, they are claiming Holy Communion as the one thing that unites them. They might have different ideas about vaccines and masks and politics, but when they come together around the table of the Lord, it is the body and blood of Christ that keep them together. God's love makes them one, despite their differences.

We're all holding on to that gift of unity and love, recommitting to the God of hope and trusting in Christ. Even this morning our Lord invites us to the table of unity and renewing love. Thanks be to God. Amen.