

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ  
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**Joshua 24: 13-22  
"As For Me and My House"**

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Homecoming Sunday

On a recent episode of the King of Queens, Doug and his friends were talking about how cool it would be to take a trip to Las Vegas, but Doug thought his wife Carrie would never let him go. So the four guys talked about what Doug could do. He decided that if he took Carrie on a fabulous spa weekend, but didn't tell her why, he would build up enough credits so that she would let him go. She, of course, found out what he was doing – angry about the idea of "wife credits" and the idea that doing something for her first would allow him to do something he wanted. The way he tried to manipulate her was sit-com humor, but reveals something that may be true for many of us. We do something in order to get something. It's an impulse as old as humankind. Sometimes it's the basis for our relationship with God – If I make a sacrifice, God will bless me. You may have even heard it from a pulpit – "if you give you will receive back tenfold." Joshua has a different take on how God works.

Chapter 24 begins as Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem. Anybody who was anyone was there. It was a new day for the Israelites. They were in the long anticipated promised land. There were no longer nomads, wandering in the desert. This was now home. Shechem was about 40 miles north of the modern day Jerusalem, near what today we know as the city of Nablus, a place we've heard on the news. Shechem is an actual passageway between two mountains and served a strategic military position. It now also serves as a spiritual passageway. They are given a choice. Now that they are stable, they can live in homes and plant fields, it was time to make a choice. Will you serve the gods of your ancestors or the Lord, Yahweh, who led you out of slavery into this new land?

Reference is made to places their ancestors had lived, such as beyond the Euphrates – which we know is in modern day Iraq. In the ancient Near East, people believed gods lived in or served a specific geographical location. There was a god for people over there and a god for people over here... Yahweh, the Lord, was among the first “traveling gods,” but even the Israelites believed their own god dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant and eventually in the temple. Even though Yahweh had led them from slavery and through the wilderness, even though Moses had instructed the people not to worship idols, it is clear that many people had statues of other gods in their possession – carried around in their luggage, so to speak.

So, as Joshua gathered together all the tribes, it was time to make a choice. And if you choose to serve Yahweh, the God of Israel, then they must “put away the foreign gods that are among you.” To say they must put them away is an interesting choice of words. Joshua didn’t tell them to bring all to the center of town for a big bonfire. There was no big spectacle about who was still carrying around a foreign god. No burial. Just put them away and incline your hearts to the Lord. That is, if they decided to serve Yahweh. This might have sounded strange to the people because it was assumed there were multiple gods. The idea that you would serve only one god was still developing. Israel was developing the belief in only one God, compared to all their neighbors in the ancient Near East. We assume there is one God. They didn’t, necessarily. Joshua also knew this would not be easy.

When they all said, we’ll serve only the Lord, the God of Israel, he responds, curiously, “no you can’t. You’ll never be able to pull it off.” And God is jealous, so if you sneak a little worship on the side, thinking no body will get hurt, God will be very angry. But they replied, “No, we can do it!” Joshua, though probably still a bit skeptical, gave them statutes and ordinances – laws – to help them follow on the right path. Joshua was a very old man at this point, and so he would not be around to keep them faithful. They would have to be their own witnesses. He even planted a stone in the ground so that when they saw it, they would be reminded of their promise and could judge their own conduct.

So, that was a long introduction, but I think that will help you when you read the passage for yourselves. Turn with me to Joshua chapter 24 and we’ll read the beginning together. In the pew Bible it starts on page 215 of the Old Testament. (Read through verse 13)

These people have been through a lot, or rather their ancestors. The people present that day were not the ones who had personally gone through these trials. And it is made clear – they did not do this on their own. God says “*I took your father, I sent Moses, I brought you, I handed your enemies over to you...*” And even now, the very ground they were standing on in Shechem – a place of

safety, where they could live in homes and plant fields – was given to them by God. Listen to verse 13. “I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.”

I love that verse. It is such a good reminder that we are not self-made men and women. Just think of this church – we didn’t build it, we didn’t pay for it, we didn’t sacrifice or struggle to keep it open. It was simply given to us. But it’s not ours to keep. It is ours to care for so that we may give it to the next generation. We are stewards of this building. We are stewards of this ministry. In fact we are stewards of everything we have. We are to care for our treasures and blessings because we must in turn pass our treasures and blessings forward. We may easily get sucked into the trap that “this – whatever it is – is mine to do with as I please.” This is my money, this is my house, but we must always ask, how am I using what I have to serve God?

So, back to Joshua. We have heard Joshua recite all the things God has done for them. “Now,” he says, “revere the Lord.” Keep reading with me from verse 14: “Now, therefore revere the Lord and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.” Joshua does not shame them for having carried these gods along with them, but makes it clear that at this passageway in Shechem, it is a new day. This is a spiritual passageway. But he gives them a clear out: Verse 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 now living.”

You see how they believed that gods lived in specific geographical areas... Now, I love this statement from Joshua. It is so non-judgmental. He doesn’t say “Serve the Lord or burn in hell.” Of course remember that in this period, the idea of hell didn’t even exist, though you could live in darkness. But Joshua didn’t make a threat. He said, “OK. Make an informed choice.” And what better way to get someone to follow your advice or direction. The rest of verse 15 very diplomatically says: “but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Again, he doesn’t say, serve the Lord or I’ll never speak to you again. He doesn’t promise to shun them, though he makes it clear there is a reason he has made this choice. But, it’s not so that God will continue to bless his family. It is because God has already blessed his family. Think of this in your own prayers: “God, please bless my family” OR “God, thank you for blessing my family.” Can you hear the difference from Joshua?

Joshua has offered the people an alternative. If you’re not going to serve Yahweh, then make a choice for who you will serve. Such a choice may seem easy. Of course we’ll serve God. By worshipping here today, you’ve made a

choice. However, there are little and lesser gods pulling at us every day. It may be easy to worship God here on a Sunday morning, but we are pulled and pushed every day of our lives. We are tempted by other gods every time we read a newspaper or talk with a friend or go to work or watch TV. Maybe you're not, but I am. I let things control me. I'll let gossip determine what I think of someone. I'll let a commercial persuade me of what I need. I'll let busywork distract me from making a phone call. Little and lesser gods may convince me that if I don't get what I prayed for from God, I should just give up believing that my prayers make a difference. Little and lesser gods try to get me to believe I deserve a better life. Joshua says, "well, as for me and my house..."

So, all the people proclaim "we will serve the Lord too." They even recite all the things God has done – brought our ancestors out of slavery, protected us along the path in the wilderness, drove out our enemies... "therefore we also will serve the Lord." Now Joshua should have been proud. They decided, just like he had encouraged them to do. Imagine their shock and hurt – and anger – when Joshua said, "Nah, you can't do it." Was he saying they weren't sincere, that they were too easily influenced to remain devout and faithful? Was he saying they were weak and wimps? Did he think they couldn't comprehend the consequences? As we know, there are both joys and costs in discipleship.

He certainly was being realistic – it won't always be such an easy choice. If you choose to serve God but then sneak a little "something, something" on the side, God will be jealous. That really puts things in perspective. It would be better for me to choose another god than to promise to serve Yahweh and not be faithful to that choice. Jesus even says it is better for you to say no and then go do what you said no to than to say yes and not do it.

I get frustrated with that all the time and feel hurt when I'm left holding the bag that is someone else's responsibility. I'll get over a "no" much faster than waiting for a promise that is not kept...and feel a lot less betrayed. Is that what Joshua believed God would feel too? Frustrated, hurt, betrayed...? Thank goodness God does not *only* get jealous but is also forgiving. Yet, real forgiveness rises out of a repentance that keeps its promise never to hurt or betray again. If we're not sincere, don't bother.

"So people," says Joshua, "make your choice carefully." And they insist, "we can do it. "We will serve the Lord." And Joshua says, "OK, but you'll have to keep your own word. You'll have to be your own witnesses to your promises." And they said, "We are witnesses." And then Joshua made a covenant with them, and helpfully, provided them with the statutes and ordinances to help them keep their promise. Furthermore, he planted a stone that they could look at and judge their own faithfulness to their promise.

We have all gathered at home today. For some, Archwood is like a promised homeland – not to elevate our own importance to brag – but many of us knew that one day we would find a home where we would find acceptance and a community to worship in – a place of stability, a spiritual passageway from wandering in a hostile wilderness, either a succession of church homes in which we ultimately did not belong for one reason or another or path that had never included God.

We have gathered at home today, drawn together from our busy lives, and offered a choice of our own. Choose this day whom you will serve. If it's not God, then make another choice. Consider your options carefully. It's better to decide not to serve God than to promise something you know you won't keep. But it also says choose *this* day, which I think means this is a choice we can make on any day. Any day we can say, "This day."

If you are not prepared to make such an important, life-changing choice today, then don't force it. It's better to say I need to pray about it, think about it, weigh the consequences than just follow the crowd. I will say that, as for me and my house, I will serve the Lord. *But* with great humility and some trepidation, I also acknowledge that I will not be perfect. I will be tempted and may even fall away.

But, may I be sincere. May I not deal falsely with God. May I not lie about my intention. And whatever decision *you* make, may you also be sincere. May you not deal falsely, try to trick, God. May you not lie about your intention. But may we all recognize how far God has already taken us.

Let us put away our foreign gods – the little and lesser gods of our culture that revere war and greed, that tempt us with wealth and beauty, that tries to shame us for love and pride. Put away the foreign gods that make us apathetic to working for justice, put away the foreign gods that ask us to give up on the hope for peace.

And may we not trivialize God by trying to earn credits in order to receive a blessing. May we remember our history and all that God has done so that we may thank God for a blessing, not respond so God will do something for us. That is the wrong reason to make a choice. "God, if only you'll...fill in the blank...then I promise to...fill in the blank." "God if you only do this, then I'll serve you." God has already led us home. Let us be grateful. Now, choose this day...as for me and my house...