

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Returning to Shechem”
Joshua 24:1-8, 14-15
October 14, 2018

The Book of Joshua is a theologically complicated book, to put it mildly... and it challenges us to pay attention to how we interpret scripture and how we let scripture interpret us.

Which is an important thing to pay attention to... especially a book like Joshua... We need a healthy framework for interpretation.

And one that I've shared with you along the way, that I especially want you to remember today is that the Bible... is primarily a ***mirror... not a window***.

Too often we have been led to think of the Bible as a ***window*** through which we can see God. If we take Joshua to be a ***window***, we look and see a God that is very violent and ruthless... a God that does not match up with who Jesus was.

That's why it's so important to remember that Jesus is the incarnation of God, not the Bible. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus, not Joshua. **That's what makes us Christians.** Jesus is the window through which we peer and begin to glimpse the Divine Heart.

The Bible, however, is more like a mirror. It reflects back ourselves... and our own struggle to understand this God and be in relationship with God... as individuals and as a community. And if we're looking closely enough... it ***will pierce us right to the core***, as our Hebrew reading this morning suggests.

It's kind of like when you see one of your kids do something that is exactly like ...what you do... and you know where they get it from...

and it's kind of like a parental sucker punch.

Our kids are often like a mirror of our own personality, and patterns, and behaviors, aren't they? And it pierces us.

Well, in the same way, the Bible is like a mirror for the people of God, more than a window into the life of God. It's trying to help us recognize our own patterns, and behaviors, and tendencies. And that is certainly true today... as we come to Joshua 24.

You see, this moment is the end of a great saga.

After God sent Moses to free the people from Pharaoh's grip... with 10 plagues, each one growing in drama,

...and after the Israelites faced certain death at the edge of the Red Sea, before it miraculously parted, allowing them to pass and then swallowing up Pharaoh's army,

...and after traveling to the holy Mountain of Sinai, where Moses went up into the thick darkness and received the holy law from God,

...and after nearly starving to death before receiving the holy manna in the wilderness,

...and after 40 years of trying to survive in the wilderness,
...and after saying good bye to their great leader, Moses,

...and after crossing into the long-awaited Promised Land, the land of their ancestors Abraham,
and Isaac, and Jacob,

...and after Joshua fought the Battle of Jericho...
and other battles, and victories, and losses, and new battles, and finally...
finally recovering their ancestral home...

The great saga is coming to an end.

And so, Joshua calls leaders from all the tribes to gather at Shechem.

Shechem is a deeply significant place.
It sits in the valley between Mt. Gerizim on the left and Mt. Ebal on the right,
two holy mountains that are ancient places of worship.

And when God first called Abraham to leave his homeland and family and to go to a place that
God would show him, God led Abraham to this very spot, to “the oak of Moreh in Shechem,” Genesis
12 says.... And it’s in this place, here in Shechem, that God said, “look around, Abraham... to you and to
your ancestors, I give this land.”

**Now, generations later,
after great struggle and hope,
they have come back...**

**and Joshua gathered leaders from every tribe to this very plot of land, to Shechem... to renew
their covenant,
their commitment as Abraham’s offspring...
to be God’s people,
to fulfill Abraham’s calling to be a “blessing to all the peoples of the earth.”**

I imagine this moment in Joshua being like the end of the great battle in the Lion, the Witch,
and the Wardrobe. After years and years of winter, the White Witch is finally defeated and all the
different Narnians are gathered together,

the badgers and the dwarfs, the centaurs and the fawns,
the bears and the beavers... all the “tribes” of Narnia are gathered together as Aslan himself
crowns Peter, Susan, Edmond, and Lucy as
the four great Kings and Queens of Narnia
to sit on the four great thrones of Cair Paravel
as a new era begins. “Once a King or Queen of Narnia, always a King or Queen of Narnia,” Aslan says.

Or if that’s not a story you know, how about the end of the Lord of the Ring’s Trilogy? Sauron,
the great evil eye has finally been defeated. At great sacrifices, and loss, and personal cost, the ring has
been destroyed.

And now leaders from all the “tribes” of Middle Earth, the hobbits and dwarfs, wizards and
elves, men and women from the land of Gondor and Rohan... all who have suffered so much, and given

so much, and fought with incredible passion and sacrifice... They are all gathered together, as the rightful king Aragon is finally crowned.

And as Aragon makes his way through the masses, everyone bows ...

Gimli the dwarf, and Legolas the elf warrior,
masses of soldiers and witnesses,

and finally, the small hobbits who may have scarified more than any, Frodo and Sam,
bow before the king.

But King Aragon looks at Frodo and Sam and says, "My friends, you bow to no one", and the king himself kneels... before the small hobbits and all the leaders and armies of middle earth with him, kneel.

And Chris... cries.

Actually, I think I cried about 3 times during that last movie the first time I saw it... because after such a great saga, and sacrifice, the end had finally come... and no one was the same, but a new beginning could finally emerge.

That is what this moment in Joshua 24 is all about. It is the conclusion of the great saga, the generation-long saga, of being freed from Egypt, into the wilderness, and finally coming to their ancestral home.

Joshua gathered leaders from all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, the ancient site of Abraham's promise. And Joshua calls them all to remember their great story. And to remember all that they've been through ...

and to kneel now before, not Joshua, but their true King...
the One who made all things,
the One who gives all things,
and the One who restores all things.

"Now therefore revere the Lord," Joshua says. "and serve the LORD in sincerity and in faithfulness."

Put away the gods of Egypt... that your ancestors worshiped.

Put away the gods from the other side of the river, the gods that have held your imagination and attention for so long.

Put away the new gods you have discovered in this land...

Or not. But at least be honest about which Gods you are serving.

"Choose this day whom you will serve...

As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

It is the great coronation of Yahweh,

the great moment where all the different tribes are called to kneel with Joshua before... the one and only... true King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And they all do. They all say, "We will serve the Lord, the God of Abraham and Moses, for Yahweh is our God."

And if this were a trilogy, this would be the end. And we could all go home and live happily ever after.

But turn the page in the Bible, and on the other side of Shechem, we find the Book of Judges... story after story of each of the tribes turning to their ambitions, getting lured back to other gods and other stories. The Book of Judges and the rest of the Old testament is full of that pattern.

They fight with one another. They posture for their economic security, and sometimes... without realizing it... they keep Yahweh on the side, but they also start worshiping again to the gods of self-sufficiency,

and the gods of retribution,

and the gods of me and mine...

...so that what looked like the great conclusion to the saga here in Joshua 24... slowly begins to unravel... as the biblical story moves forward.

Now, remember our interpretive framework? The Bible is often a mirror for us. And that's true here.

Because if you look back over the course of your life, I imagine most of us have had a Joshua 24 kind of moment.

They are the moments when we have made a decision,
where we have said "Yes" to God in a profound way.

Maybe we've endured some kind of challenge
in which God has carried us through,
or after struggling with our faith for some time,
we've finally said, "Yes. I will serve God. Yes, I will follow Jesus, "no turning back, no turning back." Right?

Or maybe we walked an aisle, or we were soaked with the waters of baptism, and our commitment was made... before God and before our community.

But turn the page... and gradually, other forces start pulling on our minds, and hearts, and lives. They always will.

Maybe work consumes all our time...
and we just can't quite fit God into this week's schedule anymore.

A new hobby comes our way, and it's a joy and delight, and a gift...
but before too long we've stopped remembering that God was the giver of that new gift.

Or maybe a new opportunity comes to make a little more money,
or get involved in an important cause,
or a new responsibility grows in our life...

And all these things are good and important... and we need to say yes to things like this along the way... But sometimes our "yes" in the beginning becomes warped over time.

If we're not careful, they are no longer an expression of our heart,
they have taken over our heart.

If we're not careful, they are no longer an out flow of our life with God,
they have replaced our life with God.

They consume our time.
They consume our thoughts.
They consume our energy.
They consume our hearts.

And anything that consumes our time, hearts, and thoughts... have slowly... ever so gradually...
become a new god in our lives.

For those of us that have said, "yes, we will serve the Lord" we don't even realize it's happened.
We've given ourselves over to a new god... and Yahweh, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, is sitting
more off to the side.

It happens so easily.
This is why Joshua challenges them so starkly. "Choose..." he says... more than once.
Choose, because there are a lot of gods out there... more than you realize, and you can't serve
them all.
There were a lot of gods back then, and there are a lot of gods today.

There are the gods your ancestors learned about back in Egypt... the gods of power and
control.... They are gods loved by many.

And there are the "gods you learned about on the other side of the river," Joshua says... the
gods of self-sufficiency and survival... and those gods sure are controlling a lot of people these days.

And there are the gods of this land you are now living in. For them, those were the gods of the
Cannonites and Ammorites... For us, that would be the gods of American ideals....
the gods of the pursuit of my own personal happiness...
the gods of a growing financial portfolio,
the gods of being smarter and more successful than my peers...
or the gods of popularity, and sports, and good grades,
and those gods have a lot of people enslaved these days.

There are a lot of gods to choose from, you know.

The only real question is, do you recognize which one you're serving?

Do you know? Or have you slapped the label "Jesus" on whatever god you're serving so that
you can go on worshiping it... and still say to yourself, "Oh, sure, I'm serving the Lord our God."

The very uncomfortable truth is... we all do that from time to time.

We don't even realize it, but we take the values of our country,
or the values of an educational institution,
or the values of our favorite news station,
or the values of our political party,
and some of those values might very well be good... but we slap the name Jesus on it...
and we can no longer tell the difference between an idol we're serving and the true King of Kings.

“Choose this day, who you will serve” Joshua challenges them. Because they need to look closely. They need to see the difference. “Choose this day...”

“We will serve the Lord.” they say with confidence, and they repeat it.

But what does the rest of the story look like? I mean, when you turn the page, does their story, and their actions, say the same thing as their words here in Shechem?

For some... it did.

For others, it certainly did not.

For most of the tribes gathered together... it was a messy mixture of both.

Dayspring, I know your hearts.

And I know that deep in you is a desire to serve the Lord with all that you are, as faithfully as you can.

But when you look at the mirror of the biblical story,
what do you see?

And if you looked at how your story has unfolded since you were last at Shechem...what does it show?

If you're anything like me, I imagine there's a messy, complicated answer to that question... as messy as the Bible itself.

And so, on this October morning, as we are gathered here,
on our sacred ground... at Dayspring in 2018,

I want to invite you... to **choose again**.

To look really closely.

And be really honest with yourself, and ask, “What God *am* I serving?” and maybe even more importantly, “If I’m honest with myself, who do I really **want to** serve?”

And if your answer is the same as those who were gathered at Shechem, what does that need to look like as we turn the page from today? Is there some other god that needs to be put away?

Is there something God is asking you to do differently?

Or Is there some step of faith you need to take?

Or some confession you need to make?

Something you need to follow through with,
or something you need to surrender?

Is there some risk God would invite you to,
or some commitment you need to make?

All of us had an insert of our music, "Ancient Words." And I want to invite you to use the back of that to reflect on those questions,
or if you have a journal with you, you can use that.

We're going to take a few moments as Stephanie plays... And I want to invite you to write something down. To be really concrete with this important question.

"Whom will you serve, and what does that need to look like as we turn the page today, and our story moves forward?"

Because the King of Kings has gathered us back at Shechem.
And the King is the one asking today...
...waiting for you to answer.

Reflection:

*What is God asking of you this day?
Is there some decision you need to make?
Something you need to endure?
Something you need to let go of?
Some step of faith you need to take?*

"Choose this day, whom you will serve..."

Hymn of Commitment, 576 "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus"