

WHOM SHALL WE SERVE?

Scripture Readings: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

You may noticed in the listing for the reading from Joshua that there is section missing. That missing section is a recitation of the salvation history of God's mighty acts for the Hebrews.

As we heard the recitation began with God's call to Abraham away from the gods of the Mesopotamian area. The recitation continues with Abraham's sons and the eventual migration to Egypt and the enslavement of the people there. God releases the people from slavery with the help of Moses and Aaron and then God leads the people out of Egypt into the wilderness where God provides for their needs.

Then God leads the people into Canaan and empowers the Hebrews to triumph in battle as they conquer parts of the land God promised to Abraham long ago. This recital of God's mighty acts is to inspire the people gathered around Joshua to serve God alone—with this remembrance of what God has done for the people, there should be no reason that they should not serve God.

The recitation ends with verse 13, "I gave you a land on which you have not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards you did not plant." [NRSV]

At first reading, I had thought that conclusion was a bit harsh. We are sometimes uncomfortable realizing that much of Joshua is written as nationalistic triumphalism. The conquest was not kind and sometimes quite horrible, and now these people rest in the comfort of their plunder. But, the overarching theme here is not that the Hebrews conquered a land but that God gave them the land. In turn, the recitation is a reminder that God has given not just a particular plot of ground—God has given us everything.

We may not talk in terms of nationalistic triumphalism, but we can understand the idea of God as creator who has made everything we hold in trust. That idea grew even more when I explored the website listed in the Minute for Mission on the back of your bulletin.

The webpage is for an annual conference called Stewardship Kaleidoscope where minister, elders, and church members can gather to explore and learn more about stewardship in the church as a whole and as individual congregations. Even though the home page is concerned with the upcoming conference in 2012, I thought the listings of workshops for 2011 was even more interesting.

One of the workshops was entitled, "Getting Gifts From Presbyterians." In the outline of the workshop, the section on why church members give listed several reasons. The first four especially caught my attention: a. Gratitude for God's love and goodness; b. God loves each of us and makes a difference in our everyday life; c. God owns everything, we are temporary managers of [God's] resources; d ... [giving] as a form of worship and an expression of gratitude.

I liked the idea that people give as a form of worship, seeing our offering as one of the many ways that we can honor God and support our community of faith. The recognition of God's creation and custody of this world and all that is in it goes back to Joshua's speech and makes his challenge to the Hebrews even more lively for us: whom do we serve? If not the creator and sustainer of all we hold in trust, then what gods do we serve? This world presents many gods for us to worship—maybe we don't call them the gods of the Amorites or the gods beyond the River but the gods of our time can surely possess our attention and hearts. Joshua's challenges continue to echo through time—are we really serving the God of our faith or something else?

Joshua's review of salvation history also reminds us that history counts; the story of how we see God active in our lives and in the life of our community is important. At our officers' retreat last September, discussion led the participants to realize that our story colors how we perceive ourselves as a community and the story we tell or the one that gets told impacts how the larger community beyond our bounds will know us.

Our story is not always comfortable and, yet, even in the midst of adversity and struggle, God remains active in our lives and in our mission and ministry. Our community continues to survive and show vitality because we trust that God loves us and supports with grace no matter what. God has called us into this community so that we can act as partners with God in God's creative grace and love for the world and toward each one of us. We need to use the gifts we hold in trust—our talents, time, and wealth—to build up this community in grace and love so that we can take those same gifts into a hurting and broken world.

Our story, though, does not end with the past.

Joshua had recited the mighty acts of God to help the people realize that God is still at work among them and as they remain faithful God's presence and work will flourish. Through their commitment in service to God, they prepared for their future—the commitment to God is not an act to perpetuate history, it a commitment for the generations yet to come so that they will also serve God in faithfulness.

We catch this same focus from the Psalmist. The Psalmist proclaims to his people that God commanded our ancestors to teach their children of the mighty acts of God so that the next generation might know of these mighty acts and teach them to the generations to come. The Psalmist surely implies that the commandment must have been followed because here we are! Somebody taught of this commandment so that we can live faithfully and now, he implies, we must teach our children of God's faithfulness to us.

In the officer retreat, the Spirit of these texts must have inspired the discussion because the officers agreed that we, as a community of faith, should focus our energy and efforts on our educational programs. As the discussion continued, the realization grew that education touches on so many aspects of the community's life: worship, service, communal connections, and mission. We have taken some first steps in realizing that focus with the hiring of our Youth Program Coordinator. Our work as a community of faith will continue—it is our hope for the future of our mission and ministry through Jesus Christ.

So we come before Joshua's challenges once again. This challenge may have been first presented over 3,000 years ago, but it remains fresh and relevant. We still need to ask ourselves: whom shall

we serve? To whom do we dedicate our service in the things given to us that we hold in trust: our lives, our talents, our time, and the wealth we claim?

Will we serve God?

I don't intend that as a rhetorical question—will we serve God? Will we serve God in our mission and ministry through Jesus Christ?