

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
November 6, 2012

South Plains

Re-enlistment

In our house, the PBS News Hour program usually runs as we prepare dinner and often as we talk at the table. But periodically they show the pictures and names of military personnel who have died in Afghanistan and Iraq, and then all our conversation stops and we watch in silence. The sacrifice of our military is both awesome and awful. By the same token, I am also at a loss for words when I hear stories of the eagerness of many veterans to re-enlist for more military service. I think I can understand that joyous patriotism. Nevertheless, I am gratefully awestruck at their willingness to serve in the face of danger. Especially in these war years, the military needs experienced people to re-enlist. The instructions for the re-enlistment ceremony are detailed and serious. "The ceremony is an official act and should be conducted accordingly." Spectacular rituals, such as parachuting into the ceremony, are not appropriate.

Like the US Army, Joshua conducts a solemn re-enlistment of Israel on the banks of the Jordan River as they are about to enter the Promised Land. 40 years in the wilderness are over. Across the Jordan, the green pastures beckon for their herds and the vineyards promise a happier life. Chapter 24 of Joshua is a pause in the journey to consider the next act in the drama of Israel. So there's a commencement ritual. In some respects, Joshua's ritual is similar to our affirmation of faith or the presentation next week of our Estimate of Giving cards. The Israelites are rehearsing an old commitment and keeping their convictions fresh by remembering what's at stake when they cross the border into that new land. I hope you will pause sometime this week and think about what it means to enter a new year with God's blessings for 2011 behind us.

Joshua begins his charge to the people with a curious historical reference. Instead of picturing father Abraham as a

man of faith, an example of piety, he recalls that Abraham and his family once served other gods. There's a rabbinic fable about Abraham growing up in Ur of the Chaldeans where his father made idols. In the story the boy sneaks into the idol factory one night and destroys the statues as an indication of his early realization that there is only one God. Abraham came from a world that worshiped other gods.

I suppose we all come to church from a world foreign to Christianity in some respects; we come from an idolatrous world. The gods of the world are all around us: materialism, selfishness, personal fulfillment, revenge, and pleasure, to mention a few. We leave those behind us to worship the God who says, "love your enemies," "take no thought for tomorrow," "take up your cross." That's quite a change of venue when we come to church.

After that reminder, Joshua rehearses for the people what they have received from the Lord: children, enough children to multiply into a great nation; freedom from slavery; and now a land, a place of their own. Because they enjoy all these gifts and more, Joshua comes to the point:

Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.... Choose this day whom you will serve. (Joshua 24:14, 15)

Up to this point, the ceremony does sound like a reaffirmation of faith, a retelling of what God has done. Just as we did with our call to worship, the people respond affirmatively, "We will serve the Lord." That certainly was the right answer, but it's not enough for Joshua. "You cannot serve the Lord," he thunders, "for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God." The problem is not their good intentions, but the follow through. Part of the beauty of a ball game is watching the follow through when the quarterback, the point guard, or the pitcher releases the ball. A poor follow through usually means a poor throw. Joshua knows human nature. When the people are released from the

wilderness to live among the plenty of the Promised Land, keeping the Lord's commandments will be more difficult than saying the words of a promise to serve the Lord.

Joshua knows we're not very good at keeping our promises. We have escape clauses and proceedings for divorce, foreclosure, and bankruptcy. In the church, we lean heavily on forgiveness the way a person with a broken leg leans on crutches. Sometimes, it seems we depend so much on forgiveness that we let our own moral code fall into disuse and we give ourselves a moral and spiritual disability. When we make a commitment to walk with the Lord, we're taking a risk. God is there to pick us up when we fall, but there are falls that merely bruise and there are falls that break lives. Some falls are disastrous and life-changing. That's what Joshua is saying. The grace of forgiveness is ours in Christ Jesus, but we risk disaster if we take our commitments to God lightly, as if God doesn't really care.

For that reason alone, it's good to take our commitments seriously, to remember what is at stake, and to consider carefully what we are saying when we repeat, "Yes, we will serve the Lord."

The sacraments of baptism and communion involve commitment to a certain life, a way of living, even a way of consuming. St. Paul warns the Corinthians that eating like gluttons while other Christians are starving for food is eating this bread and drinking this cup as a curse to ourselves.

Coming to the Lord's Table on All Saints Sunday reminds me that in a sense I am responsible to those saints who have gone before us. They hold me accountable to be at least as faithful as they were. We are stewards of the faith they passed down to us. Our financial offerings in the plate each Sunday are like this bit of bread and sip of juice. They're tokens, symbols and signs of our willingness to both talk the talk and walk the walk of Jesus. Take and eat these things with a sense of awe.