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Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Installation of Kate Farrell, Preschool director

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In Joshua and John, we hear stories of people who are gathered at critical turning points, moments when they are reminded that God has chosen them, and when they are invited—and challenged—to respond to that invitation. These are stories of people at two times when we may be tempted to turn away from God—times of triumph and times of trouble. When things are going well, and when they're not.

In the first story, Joshua addresses the people of God at a high point in their history. After forty years, they have reached the promised land, claimed it for their own. On this day, they stand at the beginning of a whole new life. Joshua will not go with them any farther. He is now an old man, and on this occasion, he calls them all together to celebrate, to thank God, and to give them his last words of counsel.

These are people who have finally found safe haven, after so many years of wandering. Yet Joshua is deeply concerned about the dangers of this long-awaited fulfillment, as they take up their lives in the promised land. Here, they will be surrounded by people who worship other gods, and Joshua is worried that the people of God will be tempted to worship them too. They have done so before, after all.

So he challenges them, “Choose this day whom you will serve”—the gods of your ancestors, the gods of your new country, or the one God, the Lord of all.

Why offer this stern counsel to these people? These are God's own chosen, brought from slavery into freedom. Now that they have finally arrived in the promised land, why would they--how could they?--forget the God who had gotten them there?

Joshua understood the enduring appeal of the gods of their ancestors. Ancient cultures had gods for everything, specialized deities, so if you had a problem you applied to the go-to god to get what you needed. The cults that formed around those gods offered people the hope of controlling

nature itself, if only they appealed to the right gods for rain, fertile land, good harvests, healing from disease. Of course, the people worshiping these gods didn't always get what they asked for, any more than we do. But they believed that they would if they made the right offering and did what they had to do to please the right god.

Honestly, sometimes I've desperately wanted that kind of god, a god that would take notes on my particular problems and take care of business. A god you can bargain with, and maybe you've tried: "Oh God, I'll lead a whole new life if only you..."

Joshua worried that God's chosen would be distracted by promises of the gods of their new country. All around us, we too are surrounded by gods wooing us with false promises. Lose ten pounds, and your dreams will come true. Eat these foods, and you'll never get sick, or old. Fall in love, and never be lonely again.

Joshua also worried that the people would turn back to the gods of their ancestors—to whatever was familiar. After all, these were the people who started muttering and complaining about the food only six weeks after escaping slavery, and then started getting together a campaign to go back to Egypt.

And maybe we have something in common with people who can't let go of the gods of their ancestors. We too sometimes long for the way things were—or the way we remember they were. A time when most people went to church, and brought their kids to Sunday school; when this place was filled to overflowing for Vacation Bible School. A time when our kids were safe (or at least safer) on the streets, when neighbors all knew one another, when most people got married and stayed married, no matter what. A time when Lutherans, at least, agreed on the truth of God—okay, now we're really in the land of fantasy.

Joshua says to the people of God, "choose this day whom you will serve"—the gods of your ancestors or the gods of your new country—"but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

In John we get a kind of reversal of this story. The people of God find themselves not in a moment of victory, but once again in a time of

insecurity and threat. Jesus is preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, speaking as a Jew to other Jews. They are living in the promised land—yet they are again dispossessed in it, in Judea held under Roman rule. They are no longer slaves, but not yet free. They await their messiah—is this the one?

This Jesus is not what they expected. They want to make him king—and he eludes them, goes to hide in a secluded place. They follow him across the sea of Galilee, looking for another miracle—more signs, more proof to convince them that he is the one. They ask him questions, and his answers don't make sense to them. Those were the words we heard last week, with Jesus telling them, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” He goes on in the reading today, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” And then he asks, “Does this offend you?” well, yeah!

Even his disciples start to have second thoughts--and here John isn't talking only about the Twelve, but about some larger number of followers. They have come this far, but now, John tells us, “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

Then, Jesus turns to the Twelve—the disciples closest to him—and asks them simply, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Simon Peter does what Jesus so often did. He answers Jesus' question with a question of his own. “Lord, to whom can we go?”

He's traveled with Jesus long enough to know that there's no promise of safety here. One minute, the crowds are going wild with enthusiasm. The next, they're trying to kill him. Peter is an experienced fisherman, a man who can sense a storm coming, and he can see the black clouds piling up on the horizon now.

But Peter has traveled with Jesus long enough to know that he's on the way with the One who IS the way of life. So really, there's no one else to turn to. It's a choice between life and death, and Peter chooses life--eternal life, that begins now, whenever we receive God's love, and love one another as we are loved.

“Lord, to whom can we go?” In some seasons we ask that same question as we greet the gospel for the day. And then we answer with Simon Peter, “You have the words of eternal life.”

That offer of life is yours today.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, for you.