

“As for Me and My Family”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

November 12, 2023

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. ...

¹⁴“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

¹⁵Now 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 living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” ¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!”

²²Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.”

²³He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ²⁴The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” ²⁵So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. (Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25)

In the closing scene of the movie *Finding Nemo*, which played on a continuous loop in our den when our girls were little, the fish from the “Tank Gang” finally achieve their greatest goal. If you know the movie, you remember that Nemo spends most of the film trapped in a fish tank in a dentist’s office. The other residents in the tank quickly draw Nemo into their shared obsession – finding a way to escape their prison and make it back to ocean. Nemo turns out to be the link they have been missing, because he is small enough to swim up into filtration system and jam the filter. When the tank quickly fills with muck and algae, the dentist has to remove the fish and put them in individual plastic bags of water. While the dentist is cleaning, the fish roll themselves out an open window and across a busy street, finally splashing safely down into Sydney Harbor. They have been dreaming of this moment for years. The only problem is that they are all still tied up in their little plastic bags. They bob there on the surface of the water as this reality sets in, and the last line of the movie comes from one of the fish, who asks simply, “Now what?”

Joshua’s final sermon to the nation of Israel is a “Now what?” kind of moment. After the death of Moses, the mantle of leadership had fallen to Joshua. He was the one who



actually led the nation across the river Jordan and into the Promised Land. He was the one who led the army in the conquest of that land. And he was the one who had kept the people committed to the covenant law God had given them at Sinai. Now, as an old man, Joshua has gathered the tribes together at Shechem for one last sermon.¹

And, in that sermon, what was Joshua most concerned about? That the people would forget. Now that they have finally arrived, now that they are safe and sound in the land of milk and honey, Joshua fears that they might forget how they got there... forget that the blessings they now enjoyed were gifts from God... and forget that their continued happiness in this new land would depend upon their faithfulness to the God who had gotten them there. Joshua knows that this is an important moment -- perhaps a perilous moment -- in the history of Israel. They had made it to the place they had been dreaming of for years, but the question on everyone's mind was, "Now what?"

In his final speech, Joshua tries to answer that question clearly and to drive the point home. The first thing to do, he says, is **REMEMBER**. Remember how God saved you, fed you, protected you, and blessed you. Never forget what the Lord has done for you.

And then, **REVERE**. Revere the Lord who has saved you, serve the God who has served you, and remain faithful to the laws God has given you.

That's the deal, Joshua says. It's simple enough, but you have to decide if you are up for it. If you say you are in, you need to mean it, so think before you speak. "***Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.***"

I am convinced that this one of the most powerful and memorable moments in the entire Old Testament, and I want to focus this morning on two aspects of this bold affirmation. The first is this: as Joshua sees it, ***faith is an act of the family***. When I am studying a passage, I sometimes look back to see what the great preachers of history have said about a text. This week I found an old sermon by George Whitefield. Preaching in London in the mid-1700's, Whitefield was inspired by Joshua's pledge, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord," to write a sermon called "The Great Duty of Family Religion." "I shall endeavor," Whitefield said, "to show after what manner a ... household ought to serve the Lord."² He goes on to list three specific things that provide the basis for family faith.

"The first thing I shall mention," he said, "is ***reading the Word of God***. This is a duty incumbent on every private person." It is also a duty incumbent on every family. It is a question we can ask ourselves. Is the Bible part of our family life? Is it read? Is it discussed? With regard to this, Whitefield specifically remembered God's instruction in Deuteronomy: "These words which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children."³

A second mark of family faith is ***prayer***. "Family prayer is a great and necessary duty," Whitefield said, "and consequently, those [who] neglect it, are certainly without excuse. And it is much to be feared, [for] if they live without family prayer, they live without God in the world."

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-2/commentary-on-joshua-241-2-14-18-4>

² George Whitefield, "The Great Duty of Family Religion," <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/whitefield/sermons.vi.html>

³ Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

The third and final mark mentioned by Whitefield, comes from a passage in Ephesians. “*Fathers,*” the letter says, “*do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in **the nurture and admonition of the Lord.***”⁴ As Proverbs 22:6 says, “*train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*” So, Whitefield continued, if “the present generation” would “have their posterity be true lovers and honorers of God,” then “parents must take Solomon's good advice, and train up ... their respective households in the way ... they should go.”

And what is the best way to bring our children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? It is to be actively engaged and committed to the church, the body of Christ in the world. Are we invested in the church? Are we bound together in study, and worship, and prayer, and reflection? Are we engaged in service to others? Being active in the fellowship of the church of Jesus Christ offers us something that we cannot find anywhere else, especially when it comes to bringing our children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It is easy for us to say we are a part of it, but are we truly a part of it? It is a vital question, because faith is not just something we hold to as individuals; it is something we hold to as a family.

But there is another remarkable aspect of Joshua’s prophetic affirmation of faith that I want to end with today. As his amazing life, which was full of extraordinary highs and lows, was coming to an end, Joshua publicly proclaims one of the inescapable realities of our faith – that, at the end of the day, faith is a choice. Faith is a decision. We can talk about scripture, theology, and Christian ethics until we are blue in the face, but none of that can evade the ultimate truth that faith in God is something that each of us must choose.

This past Thursday, the Men’s Bible Study had a great conversation about the parable of the two brothers. “A man had two sons,” Jesus said. “He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ The son answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the second and said the same; and the second answered, ‘I will go, sir’; but he did not go.” “Which of the two,” Jesus asked, “did the will of his father?” And all who heard the parable gave the obvious answer: the first son.⁵ He said “no” at first, but he changed his mind and went. The other had said he would go, but those were just words, and he did not follow through with action. Faith is not about what we say. Faith is about what we choose to do, and who we choose to be.

Earlier, we left the Tank Gang bobbing on the surface of Sydney Harbor, wondering what would be next. And here we are, again this morning. We have all made the choice to be here, but, in some ways, we are all trapped in our own little bubbles. Every family has its own needs, its own goals, its own challenges, but what comes now? What are you called to do and to be as a family? Who are we called to be as a church family?

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.”⁶

⁴ Ephesians 6:4.

⁵ Matthew 21:28-32.

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/202842-one-s-philosophy-is-not-best-expressed-in-words-it-is>

It is the same responsibility Joshua pressed upon the people of Israel... and the same challenge and question posed to us today. "Choose this day whom you will serve." As for you, and as for your family, will you serve the Lord?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? ***Amen.***