

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
November 6, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme-Informed Choices

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25, I Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25: 1-13

“Every salesman has a technique, an approach, or a hook. Some come from the ‘soft sell’ school, while others take a ‘hard sell’ approach. Then there is Joshua, the leader of the Hebrews. He is the anti-salesman.”

Today’s Old Testament lesson comes near the end of Joshua’s life, a very adventurous life. “He had lived in bondage in Egypt as a young man. He had traveled with the first generation of liberated slaves from Egypt to the border of the Promised Land. He had been part of the twelve-man reconnaissance team that first explored the Promised Land. He had paid the price of his people’s sin, living through their forty-year death sentence in the wilderness. He had led the next generation across the Jordan, and through Canaan’s hills and valleys, waging war against the powerful and plentiful inhabitants of the land. He had seen the people fret at the Sea of Reeds, defile themselves at Sinai, balk at the border, and complain their way through the wilderness. And now, as Israel stood on the verge of a new chapter, and as he prepared to go the way of all flesh unto death, there is no question about what he wanted most of all.”

“Joshua’s heartfelt goal was that the Hebrew people should live in total devotion and careful obedience to Yahweh.” Yet, he wanted them to be fully informed of their choices before making this vital commitment. While he did not want to force them to do things his way, at the same time, with all his heart, he wanted them to follow God. Let us examine the two conflicting approaches Joshua uses to move the Hebrews to make an informed choice.

“His first approach is ‘hard sell’ inasmuch as he pushes the people to make a decision. ‘Choose this day,’ he insists.’ This decision is too important to put off until another day. It must be made today. Right now! So, with a tent-evangelist’s-altar-call urgency, Joshua appeals to the people to ‘put away’ the accumulated gods of other people, and to make a once-and-for-all choice, right now!”

Joshua’s second approach appears to be the opposite of his first call to commitment. “While he, himself, stands at the altar of God ready to make the invitation to invite people forward, at the same time he seems to point the people in another direction. ‘Now 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.’ In his second approach Joshua uses reverse psychology. He is challenging the people to make an informed choice, whether for the Lord or not.”

“His dual approach technique is effective. Presented with the expressed possibility of serving other gods, the people retort, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods!’ So Joshua has them where he wants them, right? Wrong. Now he becomes the evangelist who seems to turn people away from the altar! ‘You cannot serve the Lord,’ he says, ‘for he is a holy God.’”

“Here is the unusual car salesman that tells you to go away. ‘You can’t afford this make and model,’ he insists, ‘so you might as well go elsewhere and select a car from one of the cheaper brands.’ It seems as though he doesn’t want to make the sale that is precisely his purpose.”

“Of course, what Joshua wants the people to do is very familiar to the followers of Jesus Christ. He wants them/us to count the cost. He wants them/us to be fully informed. He does, indeed, want them/us to sign on the dotted line of their/our covenant with God, but not lightly, not carelessly. Nonchalance is not the proper posture for making vows to God.”

“In the end, the people respond positively to Joshua’s discouraging call,” his reverse psychology. Then “he gives them a two-part instruction: First, ‘put away the foreign gods;’ and second, ‘incline your hearts to the Lord.’” Quotes from Emphasis, November/December 2005

In a more positive, yet just as demanding way, we Presbyterians ask “whom shall we serve” in our vows of membership. It is important you know that these vows are presented in the first session of our new member and confirmation classes. We want people to be fully informed of the choices they are making. The first vow is: “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” We are being asked to choose between evil and God. The second vow is: “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?” We are being asked to choose between giving ourselves to this world which will die and decay or to the everlasting and redeeming Lordship of Jesus Christ. The third vow is: “Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?” We are being asked to choose between following the will of the world and the will of Christ.

The fourth and last vow we ask of members really works into the parable of the bridesmaids Jesus told in Matthew. Here is the vow: “Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?” Both, in the parable and the vow, we are being asked if we are really fully informed, and completely prepared to choose right now whom we will serve.

Are we really fully informed and prepared for Jesus to show up in our lives at any moment? Will we follow him no matter where he leads us? In this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom and we are the bridesmaids. He is challenging us to examine how prepared we are to fulfill our vows of membership, and our commitment to God for a lifetime, in good times and bad. He is also asking if we will be faithful even if he does not return to earth when we expect him.

Bible scholar, M. Eugene Boring wrote: “It is not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that set the wise apart from the foolish—it’s the readiness. Five of the bridesmaids are ready for the groom to be delayed, but the other five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start whenever the groom arrives; the foolish have only enough oil for their own timetable. Five are prepared and ready, even for a delay; five are not.” TNIBC, Vol. VIII, pg 451

“Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount.” It is “sharing in the worship and

ministry of the church through our prayers and gifts, our study and service, and so fulfilling our calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.” Many can do this for a short while; but when the fulfillment of the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. “Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.” Being a member of the church can be exciting at first, but it becomes more demanding when staffing and money are short, and fulfilling our calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ means deeper involvement because our dreams for the church and the bridegroom have not arrived as expected. [TNIBC](#), Vol. VIII, pg 451.

At the beginning of the life of faith, we cannot really tell the followers of Jesus apart. They all have lamps; they are all excited about the wedding; they all know how to sing, “Lord, Lord.” Deep into the night, when we spot some persons attempting in vain to fan a dying flame to life because their oil has run out, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness. In this parable and in our vows of membership, we must not only choose whom we will serve but how well we will serve God in Jesus Christ. [TNIBC](#), Vol. VIII, pg 451.

Then in the passage from Thessalonians, Paul takes us to the culmination of our choice as to whom we will serve and how well we will serve. He leads us to the actual return of Christ to earth. The Greek word for this end of the world event is the parousia. Paul and the people of the church of Thessalonica were running into a serving problem. There was the expectation that parousia would occur before any of those early Christians died. But, people were dying. Questions were being asked about what happens to those who have died before the parousia and those who were still alive. Along with these inquiries people wondered when indeed was Jesus returning and what do we do until then? Do we continue to serve the Lord and the church?

Paul’s answers to these questions in other parts of the letter to the Thessalonians, were similar to Joshua’s challenge to the Hebrews; Jesus’ point in the bridesmaid parable; and what we are asked to do in our vows of membership. We are to serve the Lord. Not wanting these anxious people of Thessalonica to be uninformed, Paul

gave them a three point description of the return of Christ and the resurrection from the dead in order to comfort them, and affirm their hope in the resurrection. First of all, because of your decision to give your loyalty to God in Jesus Christ alone, you can “believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” Second of all, “we declare to you by the word of the Lord... the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Third of all... “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

Yes, this description of the parousia is different from other parts of the Bible where it seems that when a person dies in the Lord they go straight to heaven or they stand before God to be judged. We simply do not know the exact details of when or

how the resurrection from the dead occurs. What is common to all descriptions in the Bible is that our resurrection from the dead and our reunion with our loved ones depends entirely on God to choose to do this for us. We have no immortal spirit or soul that automatically soars to heaven. Once we die, it matters not what happens to our body on earth. God remembers who we are, to whom we gave our loyalty, and whom we served. It was God alone who raised Jesus from the dead. It is the same God who alone can do this for us. Our assurance of God raising us from the dead lies in our choosing to believe in and serve only Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

How then shall we respond to this and all the sales pitches we have heard today? Until Jesus returns, and raises us from the dead, we must become fully informed in our faith and continue to choose God over evil—Jesus Christ over the world. We must trust in his grace and love by being Christ's faithful disciples who obey his Word and show his love, and remaining faithful members of Christ's body the church. Or in simpler terms: Let us keep our lamps filled with oil. "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." May the Lord find us ready and faithful!