

Sermon 12 November 2023

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“...choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15)

What God will / do we choose to serve and how will we live out our lives in service to this God. In the words we use. The conversations we have. The stories we tell. The lives we live.

The Israelites are now in the promised land and Joshua gathers them together to renew their covenant with God. A covenant first made between God and Abraham in this very place – Shechem. Joshua reminds them of their history. Reminding them of all that God has done and calling them to respond to God in sincerity and faithfulness. He calls them to put aside their worship of foreign gods and to serve the Lord. Joshua urges them to think carefully and earnestly about which God they will choose to serve. And the implications of what it means to serve the Lord, God. They need to weigh up whether they will serve the God who has been faithful. The God who has been active in their restoration and redemption or whether they will continue in the way of their past, serving other gods. And so, we get a sense of where this community is and how they are now being called to live in this new land – the promised land. They are being called to live a new life. A different life. Joshua warns them that if they choose to serve the Lord, they need to consider what that means for the way in which they live their lives. There are consequences to their choice. For themselves and future generations.

The psalmist recounts Israel’s history – God’s faithfulness and saving work and Israel’s rebelliousness and unfaithfulness. We only read the first 7 verses, but this is a long psalm that tells of God’s work in the life of Israel’s history – the good and the bad so that future generations can learn from the past and choose to live differently – not be like the previous “rebellious, stubborn generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast whose spirit was not faithful to God.” (Psalm 78: 8). But instead to “set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.” (Psalm 78: 7). This serves as an encouragement for us to listen to God’s teachings and place our hope in God now and in the future.

So, I ask again, what God will / do we choose to serve and how will we live out our lives in service to this God. What does our service look like? This is important because our choice

determines our commitment and shapes our identities, our communities. Sometimes, we follow past family, faith, and political traditions blindly. We tell our stories, share our history, in a particular way. From a familiar perspective. Sharing only the good parts – the successes – choosing to brush over / leave out the mistakes or how others experienced / were affected by our choices. Today we are challenged to intentionally decide who we will serve and to be aware of the implications of our choice because they have consequences. The way we choose to share our history shapes our legacies and values for ourselves and future generations.

And as we think about this in the context of our readings, we see that the Israelites celebrate God's faithful action in bringing them into the promised land. And it is good and right that they celebrate it – giving praise and thanksgiving and honour to God. But the other side of this story that we must be conscious of, is the fact that other people inhabited this land first. And so, the people who were living there have been dispossessed of their land - displaced. For us living in SA we know very well that story where some people were forcibly removed and dispossessed of the land they lived on. And many are still dispossessed of land today. And so how do we tell of God's faithfulness - considering the opposing perspectives and experiences of people – and still live as God calls us to live? How do we choose to serve God in a way that values and respects the individual and the community? How do we bring about justice and peace for all people? How do we tell stories that speak hope into people's lives?

Next year is an election year. Next week is voter registration week. What conversations are we having about the elections? What hope are we sharing around elections? I must admit, the most common narrative that I have been hearing is, "nothing will change. My vote won't make a difference." What a sense of hopelessness and despair. In her talk at synod, Dr Gillian Godsell said, and I quote, "We can't control how the politicians speak, but we can control how we speak. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can remove not only anger, but contempt and venom from all of our discussions of these elections. We can learn – and this will not be an easy task and may be a task for the rest of our lives – to see political parties as our neighbour, and individual politicians, every single one of them, as being exactly what they are: made in the image of God." She goes on to say, "If we abandon rage and fear and insult in this election campaign, just in our own conversations, we make room for hope." (Dr Gillian Godsell, Presentation at 66th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg on Saturday 28th October 2023, Christians and the Election)

As followers of Christ – as Christians - hope is foundational. It is at the very core of our belief system. It is the story we need to tell and the life we are called to live. Hope is the message that comes through in our second reading and Gospel text.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul speaks hope to people who are experiencing a deep sense of loss. They were clearly concerned that their loved ones who had died before Christ returned would miss the resurrection and be excluded from the kingdom. Paul is saying, yes, 'we really thought Jesus was coming back immediately but this has not happened and so we need you to understand that we have hope, and we live through our suffering with this hope.' (Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcast-type/sermon-brainwave>). We stand on the promise of Christ's return and, together with our loved ones who have died, that we will be with the Lord forever. We are called to live lives of hope. In the face of suffering, in the face of delay. Because we don't know when Christ will return, but we wait with hope.

This exactly what Jesus is saying to his disciples in the Gospel text from Matthew when he says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13). Not only are we called to be prepared and ready to meet the bridegroom - for Christ's coming – but we also need to be prepared to face unexpected delays. Like the early Christians, we too are still waiting. And the question is, how are we waiting? Are we truly waiting in readiness and with hope. Or have we given up waiting? This parable is about attitude. About a way of life. A life lived in service of God. A life lived prudently (wisely, carefully) – in word and deed. In the conversations we have. In the stories we tell. In the service we live out. For ourselves and future generations. We are called to equip ourselves daily, consciously, for times of turmoil, suffering and delay. For the promise of a future reality. As we do this, we are to consider the consequences of not being prepared and the impact it will have on the lives of those who will suffer because of our unpreparedness – our foolishness.

We live for, and serve, God by serving others. May our lamps shine brightly, dispelling hopelessness and despair. For as Dr Gillian Godsell says, "Hope is not a response to a good external situation. It is a choice we make every day – every hour when the going is particularly rough. Hope, says academic Rebecca Solnit, is the emergency axe we need to break down the door to the future. May our contribution to the elections be our hope and not our fear. Our joy, and not our anger." (Dr Gillian Godsell, Presentation at 66th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg on Saturday 28th October 2023, Christians and the Election). My prayer is that this may be true not only for the elections but for our daily lives as well My

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Shining our lamps brightly. Dispelling hopelessness and despair. As we choose this day to
serve the Lord. **Amen**