

Remember and Choose

Joshua 24 is a farewell speech, given at the ancient equivalent of a church convention. Recall what happened before this speech beginning with the promise given to Abraham in Genesis: You will be a great nation in a promised land. Genesis ends with a great nation in Egypt, the wrong land. Exodus begins with their deliverance from Egypt's oppression. Exodus closes with the nation on the border of the land. Deuteronomy is Moses' last speech as they're about to cross over into the land of Canaan. Joshua is the story of possessing the land. It contains some of the most disturbing parts of the Bible, stories of conquest and annihilation. Joshua ends with a great people in the promised land. The twelve tribes of Israel have completed their journey from slavery in Egypt to a new homeland. Now, how will they live? What God will they serve? ¹

Joshua 24 begins with a speech, becomes a dialogue, and ends with a commitment. In his speech, Joshua reminds the people of their history, their story.

It's a story of being chosen and being called. This is what God says: A long time ago, I brought your ancestor Abraham out of a land where the people served many gods. I promised to give him many children if he would serve me and me alone.

It's a story of being blessed. God says: Abraham was faithful to me, and I gave him Isaac. I was with Isaac, and with his sons Jacob and Esau.

It's a story of being delivered and protected. God says: When the children of Jacob went down to Egypt, I sent Moses and Aaron to rescue them from the pharaoh. I helped your ancestors cross the Red Sea and escape. I brought you safely through the desert. I gave you victories over many enemies.

It's a story of being provided for. God says: I have given you a new place to live. You live in towns you did not build and eat food you did not plant. Everything you have, I have given to you.

These stories told in the book of Joshua are quite dramatic and spectacular. Joshua is an "all or nothing" book. Israel gains total victory when they are fully loyal to their covenant with God. Total victory means annihilation of their opponents and complete occupation of their territory. There isn't much nuance with Joshua.

How do we read this book? Do we read Joshua as God ordaining horrendous violence? Do we read Joshua as the victors justifying the violence they used to win?

These stories could be used as encouragement for the powerless. They contain a promise that God is on the side of the oppressed. God sees and addresses evil. This could be a story of justice. For a long time, while they were slaves in Egypt, the Israelites couldn't enjoy the fruits of their own labor. But now they can. They labored for things they could not enjoy, but now they're enjoying things for which they did not labor. As liberated people, they are now able

¹ Sources consulted for this sermon include: Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 106: Joshua Renews the Covenant — Pulpit Fiction](#); Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary, [#507: Joshua Renews the Covenant - Oct. 16, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 407 Retelling the Story \(Joshua 24:1-18\) \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Gordon H. Matties, *BCBC: Joshua*, Herald Press, 2012, pp. 356-380.

to enjoy a better life. These stories of liberation provide hope to those who are powerless to change their situation.

But what about the people who built and planted and can't enjoy the fruit of their labor? Joshua doesn't address the people who have been displaced. The Joshua story says they're all exterminated. The book of Judges, however, refutes the reports of total annihilation. In Judges, the conquered people are still around.

The stories recounted in Joshua 24 have been used and continue to be used as a weapon for the powerful. Churches and nations proclaim themselves to be God's promised people and use these stories to attack, displace, and even exterminate other people. This was the case when Christian European monarchies declared themselves to be the promised people. North America was the new promised land, and the Native Americans were the new Canaanites. The Doctrine of Discovery allowed European entities to seize lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples under the guise of discovering new land. The land was declared empty because it was not inhabited by Christians.² This is a misuse of the Joshua story. When we use these texts to overpower, marginalize, enslave, or wipe out, we are worshipping power, not God. In fact, we are enemies of God.

We can't change what's recorded in the text, but we can ask some questions. Is this God's version of the story? Or is it Joshua's version of what he thinks God says. Joshua is a warrior. This could be how he imagines God would tell the story. Some parts of the biblical story depict the coexistence of those who follow the one true God and those who don't. Other stories assume it's impossible to follow the one true God if there are other people around who worship other gods, so the best course of action is to get rid of all the other people.

We can't change Joshua's version of the story. And so, we wrestle with it, even as the biblical stories wrestle with each other about the relationship between violence and the identity and mission of God's people. All of us have stories that we wish weren't part of our story and memories that we wish weren't in our memory. Pretending those things didn't happen is almost never the right answer. A better way is working back through those stories, processing them, then thinking about what choices we can make differently the next time. We can do that with the biblical stories as well.

Let's return to Joshua 24. The main point of Joshua's speech in the first 13 verses, is that at every turn it is God who is working on Joshua's and Israel's behalf. The point is the undying faithfulness of God against all odds. Now that they've arrived in the land promised to them, they need to be careful. Settling in the land could be a reason for them to stop relying on God. Now they can take care of things themselves unlike when they were wandering in the desert and entering the land. Remembering their story reminds them that they still are dependent on God. They still need God, because through it all, this is a story of being loved and forgiven. And all people need love and forgiveness no matter their circumstances.

The dialogue between Joshua and the people begins in verse 14. Now that they've remembered the past, they need to decide. The Lord God has protected and provided for the people throughout their history. Considering what they know about the past, what god will they choose to worship in the future?

Throughout their long relationship with Yahweh, the God who chose them, the people of Israel were not always a monotheistic culture. They didn't always worship just one god. Abraham and Sarah grew up in a culture that worshiped many gods. Israelites before, during, and

² [Discovery doctrine - Wikipedia](#); [Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery – A movement of Anabaptists \(dofdmnno.org\)](#).

after slavery in Egypt, were well acquainted with the many gods worshiped in that land. The people of Canaan, where the Israelites lived at the time of this speech, worshiped Baal and many other gods.

At the end of his speech, Joshua gives the people a choice: “Serve the Lord” or “serve the other gods.” You can serve the gods of your ancestors. You can serve the gods of this land and this people. Or you can serve Yahweh, the one who brought you to this place, but this will be the hardest choice. They must decide, knowing the full history of God’s care and faithfulness to them, if they will continue to serve and honor this one God and give up all the others.

He questions them over and over. They promise over and over.

Joshua states: Today, you must choose. Either serve God or serve the gods that your ancestors worshiped. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

The people reply: We will not forsake God to serve other gods. The God of Abraham is our God.

Joshua warns: You must be sure of what you’re saying. Serving God is difficult. God is holy and jealous and will not share you with other gods. God will get extra angry if you go back on your promise.

The people confirm: We are sure. We will serve God.

Joshua certifies: I will write down all that we have promised today. We will serve and obey God. This is our covenant, written in the book of the law of God.

The people vow: We will serve and obey the Lord our God.

Only after this extended dialogue does Joshua set up a stone under an oak tree as a witness to their resolve to serve the Lord. This is a reminder to the people, not to God, because God won’t forget.

Stones are a recurring theme in the book of Joshua. The tribes set up a pile of stones to mark the place where they crossed the Jordan River. In an earlier covenant renewal, Joshua built an altar of uncut stones and wrote the Law of Moses on them. Heaps of stones also marked the graves of a disobedient man named Achan and of defeated kings. In what sense might a stone be a witness?

A witness is not just a person who can give a firsthand account. It can also be something that serves as evidence. A stone is a long-term marker, a highly visible part of the landscape. People will come and go, but a large stone will endure for many generations.

We’re familiar with the setting up of and preserving markers to help us remember. We remember people, their actions, and their ideas. We remember deaths, their significance, and our resolve (our hope) that atrocities will not be repeated.

The stones strewn about the book of Joshua witness to significant experiences shared by the people in their new land. This particular marker reminded insiders of the critical covenant they made here. It bound the people not only to God but also to the surrounding landscape that is part of God’s promise. Children and outsiders no doubt asked questions about the stone. Its significance was explained again and again.

Today, Joshua’s demand for a choice competes with a culture that emphasizes the present moment over the past and the future. A culture that values freedom and the postponement of commitment. But God continues to call each of us to remember our stories and to make choices. When have I been chosen, called, blessed, delivered, protected, provided for, loved, or forgiven? What were the difficult times, the joyful times, the turning points? When did I feel God’s presence or guidance in a particular way? When did it seem that God was far away?

Like Joshua, we bring a particular framework to our remembering. Some of us tend to remember mostly the good times; others mostly the bad times. It may be helpful to get the perspective of someone else as we remember. A relative, a friend, a counselor, someone from church may help us remember well.

In our remembering, we think about the choices we have made – especially when it comes to matters of faith. Many choices, especially the life-altering ones, cannot be separated from our faith. How we view the world, how we treat others, how we make commitments, what kind of work we do – all have a faith dimension. Even what clothes we wear, what food we eat, what car we drive, and what entertainment we choose are affected by what kind of god we serve. Do we serve the gods of self-interest, self-gratification, greed, and consumption? Or do we value healthy relationship with ourselves, with others, with creation, and with God?

Some choices can be marked at a specific time and place: declaring a college major and graduating with that major, signing a job contract, getting married, being baptized, joining a church. These are witnessed by other people – sometimes large groups of people with ceremonies and symbols.

Other choices are more routine. As I mentioned a bit ago, we make choices all the time about what to wear, what to say, and what to do.

Ten years ago, as my brothers and I discussed how to celebrate our parents' 60th wedding anniversary, one of my brothers suggested that they could renew their wedding vows. I thought this sounded great. But when we mentioned the idea to our father, Dad said no. He said, "I made those vows 60 years ago and I haven't changed my mind so why do I need to renew them now?"

True. However, I believe Dad did renew those vows thousands of times during their marriage. He made the choice every day to remain committed to my mother even when the times were difficult. By the time Dad died, they had been married more than 24,000 days. Even in the midst of dementia, I believe he continued to honor that commitment.

We do the same sort of thing in our commitment to follow the ways of God in every day, in every encounter, in every choice. In our faith and life journey, we run into dangers and temptations. There are a multitude of false gods we can choose to divide our loyalties on. We, like Joshua and the Israelites of old need to remember where we've been, where we are now, and where we're going. Jesus makes that quite clear for us in the gospels. He tells us we, like the Israelites have been delivered, protected, and provided for. We, like the Israelites have been and still are chosen by God. We have been called, loved, and forgiven. We have been assured that God is with us always. Do we take that too much for granted? Do we divide our commitments and our loyalties? Or do we, like Joshua and the Israelites say: "We will serve the Lord"?

Each Sunday in a sense is a covenant renewal ceremony. We are given the opportunity to remember who we are, whose we are, where we are, where we are going and how to get there. Therefore, Joshua's confession of faith is one that we all can join in: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

May it be so.