

## Moving Forward by Looking Back

Sermon by John Strommen on Joshua 24:1-20      October 14, 2018

Ever felt like your life was off track a bit, where you needed to get back to what you really value and believe? Where you needed to return to who you really are?

The Israelites were having one of those times. They had lost their way and their identity. Having survived the wilderness for a couple generations following the exodus from Egypt, God had led them to the promised land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, as scripture tells it. But also a land with many local gods – many, shiny, convenient gods, ready to bargain with for good fortune. The Israelites gradually began blending into the diverse culture around them without discretion, thinking they could still be loyal to Yahweh – the God of Israel – while also worshipping local gods freely.

Joshua therefore gathered the leaders of Israel for a “come to Jesus” speech...or should I say a “come to Moses” speech. Jesus’ time was still over a thousand years away, while the revered Moses had led them just before Joshua took over! “*Choose this day who you will serve,*” thundered Joshua! Don’t just go with the flow. You need to make a choice, which God will you serve?

We have the same choices today, don’t we? Which god will we serve? In a more secular culture like ours, our god is not always a god of organized religion, but rather *that in which we place our trust* -like “trust” funds, financial security, accomplishments? That which has ultimate importance in our life. Like the Israelites of old, most of us have several gods competing with the God we worship today, unless you feel that you’ve mastered the first commandment.

The verses today tend to focus on Joshua’s rally cry to “choose this day whom you will serve!” And yet, most of Joshua’s speech consists of what? *Telling their story*. About how God made a covenant with their father Abraham, blessed Abraham and Sarah with descendants, delivered them from slavery, sustained them in the wilderness, led them into battle, protected them from foes, brought them to the promised land, and so on. This had been playing out for a few hundred years.

Why do you think Joshua took the time to review their story? A clue to this question can be found in the Dagara (duh-geer’-uh) Tribe in West Africa. They are noteworthy in that every member of their tribe has a song associated with him/her from birth. A song that represents their identity. A song that everyone knows. When that child grows up, their song is sung during rites of passage, like entrance into adulthood or marriage, for instance. It’s also sung when a member has lost his/her way, either through wrongdoing or self-destructive behavior. The village members then gather in a circle around the person and sing that person’s song so that that they might remember their identity, an identity based on the gift of life, not on fear, self-destructive or hurtful behavior.

The people of Israel had a song, too. Not so much as individuals, but as a people. Their song was their story, a story that needed to be told and retold over and over again. Why? To remember who they were. And, equally important: to remember how faithful God is. The Israelite leaders to whom Joshua spoke were two or three generations removed from the exodus in Egypt and the receiving of the Ten Commandments. And yet, this was a part of their story, too, and they needed to have it sung for them. What they had known was a God who blessed them with the land of Canaan and was with them through war and peace, guiding, nurturing, empowering. Their song and their story was about the incredible

faithfulness of Yahweh – the God who said to them, *“I will be your God, and you will be my people”* and *“you are blessed to be a blessing.”*

For the Israelites, over and over again, the way forward for them began with looking back, in the rear-view mirror, for that told them who they were, and in many ways, where they were going.

Rollie Martinson is preaching here next week, and Rollie has shared with me that one church he’s worked with has developed a simple process for small groups where one of the things members always do when they check in with each other is to name a blessing of the past week for which they’re thankful. It’s a way of getting in touch with your own story and how God is present in it, and where God is going.

The passages in Joshua remind me of a wonderful scene from *“Mad Max beyond Thunderdome,”* an unlikely entry any sermon, perhaps. The movie is a post-apocalyptic movie – probably nuclear – that has left Sydney, Australia a ghostly shell. This aspect of the movie is more like devastation of the exile period for the Israelites. For our purposes, what’s interesting is that with a band of survivors, there is re-birth and optimism, because curiously, they feel blessed. They feel blessed to have a story that’s holding them together - and the telling of their story together every day is how they ground themselves in their identity and in hopefulness. All of this in their own strange syntax.

(movie clip)

In the movie, they call it the *“tell,”* and it forms the basis for their hope for the future. Joshua knew how to tell the story and when. He knew what their song was. Do you think this sort of thing helped their faith and commitment? Well, following his own telling, he concluded with the famous challenge, *“Choose this day who you will serve! As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!”* The Israelites followed suit.

What’s our *“tell”*? our song? our story? It’s the same one as Joshua and the Israelites – but with some additions. Prophets have been added, like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Kings have joined the story, like David and Solomon. And of course, there’s Jesus, the very center of our identity as Christians. In looking back, because of what we see there, we have hope and confidence to move forward, to exercise our free will to choose God. This we can do because God has already staked a claim to our lives and chosen us! God has shown up, and no that doesn’t mean our lives have been a bed of roses. It means God showed up not only in the beautiful roses but in the thorns, too. Israel learned this in the wilderness. We have learned that God shows up in a crown of thorns, in fact.

What about your own tell, song, story - the one that’s just yours? You might say, *“Well, I’m not sure I have a faith story. Not one worth telling, anyhow.”* And yet, not one of you would be here today if you didn’t have faith. And you wouldn’t have faith unless you had some kind of experience of God that led you to faith or reinforced the idea that faith is real, that God is real. Someone - or many people in your life - who showed you God, something that happened somewhere in your head, heart, emotions. What is that story or song for you? What do you see in the rear-view mirror? Every single one of you not only has a faith story, but a rich one at that.

By recalling our collective story, and our individual stories of the dawn’s gradual light, we learn about who we are; we learn to understand God more, trust in God more. To remember it and to understand it is to be given strength and clarity about where God might be headed with us.

In your bulletin, you will find a half sheet with the words, "A time in my life when I think God was blessing me." Go ahead and write something down, anonymously, put it in the offering plate as your part of your public offering today. If you want this to be confidential, write that next to your blessing. If enough of you have offerings to share, we might post them – again, anonymously.

Maybe this is part of your song.

Amen.