

## Telling the Story (Be Watchful)

Texts: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (Series A, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 78:1-7

Matthew 25:1-13

Let us pray

When we look at the examples of Noah and Abraham, Joshua and Caleb, there are similarities as we consider the importance of *faith* and *obedience*. It all began in the Book of Numbers, chapters 13-14, when the Israelites were about to enter the Canaan; Moses sent out twelve spies to explore the land. The twelve returned from scouting the land of Canaan and reported to Moses and the people of Israel. The people were all excited; God himself had led them up from Egypt, and finally the moment of truth had arrived.

But the Israelites' rejoicing didn't last long. As part of their report, the spies had also encountered the inhabitants of the land: strong people dwelling in fortified cities. Their report was dismal: *"The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. ... We were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."*

But Joshua and Caleb, two of the spies, spoke up. *"If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us ... Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us."*

*Faith is a choice.* By not believing God and what God has done, the people of Israel were, in effect, denying God's power and glory. His righteous anger was kindled against them, and He swore that no one over the age of twenty would ever enter the land, but they would all perish in the wilderness.

According to the Book of Numbers, 603,550 people left Egypt and only Joshua and Caleb, two of the originals, made it to the Promised Land. The rest died in the wilderness including Moses.

This morning, we will focus our attention on the Book of Joshua; as Joshua was about to die – he called the people of Israel together - to *remember* and to *decide*. We, too, are called together here today - to *remember* - and to *decide*.

What are we to remember today? For some:

- the sacrifice, the pain, the loss
- the friendships - the closeness - the hopes and fears
- the evil that threatened - the victory that came about.

We also remember the deeper things of God and of this world - the things in this world that divide families, groups, peoples, and nations one from the other - and of the need not only for peace but for the **justice** upon which true peace is built - the justice and the love that shows mercy to those who seek it - and even those who do not.

The value of remembering...

- for some, is strictly in telling the story, in sharing what is important to them.
- for others, it is the issues, the lessons involved in any telling of the past, and the education it can provide.
- for others, it is a matter of honour and respect.
- it's a matter of evoking the emotions and feelings that are best in a person: laughter, joy, tears, peace, outrage, forgiveness, humility, determination.

Remembering is good - but primarily today, remembering is a call for decision on our part and without the decision, without deciding what we are called to do, remembering has little power or purpose.

In our scripture reading this morning, Joshua told the story of how God had treated the children of Israel - how he had chosen Abraham - and Isaac - and Jacob and promised them a land - how he had remembered Joseph in Egypt and raised up Moses to deliver the people - how he had led his people safely from the controls of Pharaoh and watched over them in the Wilderness of Sinai - and how finally God brought the 12 tribes across the Jordan and into the promised land, driving out their enemies before them, and giving them a land that they had not laboured for, grapes and olives that they didn't plant.

He tells the story; he remembers and he then calls the people to understand what has been remembered and to make a decision - the decision to choose to follow and be true to the God who gave them life - or to choose to follow in the path of the nations around them and to worship their gods.

The people respond to this challenge by reciting back to Joshua the story as they remember it - of how God worked miracles to set them free and protected them from other nations, and they then say to Joshua that, like him, they will serve the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob - the God of Moses - the God that has been good to them.

When Joshua reminds the people of their *history* - of their *experience* - and then demands that the people choose which God they will serve - he tells them that this is no easy decision - that there is a cost involved, the cost of total commitment.

And should they falter - should they put their hand to the plow and look back - should they attempt to live with one foot in the kingdom of God and the other in the world of idols - God himself will turn against them and make terrible things happen to them.

Today we remember, and we are called to choose. We are called to choose, this day, much the same thing Joshua called the people of Israel to choose. We are called to choose life or death, to choose God and the things of God - or the things of this world.

And the message for us is the same as the message to the children of Israel, the same message that every veteran of every battle with this world's evil can tell you - namely they who forgot - they who choose to ignore the call of God and to instead be like everyone else - to be a people who only look after themselves – a people who seek wealth, instead of justice - who pursue happiness, rather the way of truth - who elevate peace as a value over that of the truth of God – they are lost.

Should we follow other gods?

- should we value our own prosperity while ignoring the poverty of others?
- should we desire our own comfort more than we desire to help others?
- should we value the peace of endless compromise to the hard work of speaking truth to those who lie? And in doing justice, even though it may cost us our own lives, then not only will the sacrifice made by so many others on our behalf be in vain but their memory dishonoured.

The kingdom of God is the kingdom that is distinguished by joyful peace, by freedom from pain and death, by love that knows no hate, by plenty that knows no limit; it demands our all.

Faith is a choice: this different spirit was a spirit of faith. Faith means not looking at what is visible, but believing that God is Almighty. Faith means being obedient even when we can't see the results. Faith means action. Faith *gives* results.

God wants us to choose to believe and choose to obey. He wants us to sacrifice something. God was with Joshua and the Israelites but they had to show that they wanted it. In the conquest of Canaan that followed the fall of Jericho, not one city was taken without a faith.

God can't help those who don't want to believe. He has too much respect for the free will He has given us. In fact, without faith, it is impossible to please God. On the other hand, 'He richly rewards those who diligently seek Him' (Hebrews 11:6)

Joshua concluded in chapter 24, verse 15b, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." "*Ich aber und mein Haus wollen dem HERRN dienen.*"

As Jesus gave himself wholly for us on the cross - and in doing so rose to new life on the third day - so we are called to give ourselves completely for the sake of what is right and good.

This morning's gospel reading boils down to **watchfulness**, like Joshua of old. Have we been watchful in the events of our life? Do we keep our ears alert to the signs of God passing in our life? If so, our lives will be bright, despite all anxieties.

We will be gracious even in the face of great disappointments. Hence, if our faces are lit with the Good News given to each of us, we will be able to enter and face the most unwanted events in life.

We know the result. When troubles overtake us, we are left without any faith, hope or love. We also know the result that awaited those who did bother to carry that oil and the light in their lives. The wise ones are able to keep their light burning when troubles overtake them.

At Baptism, the *Candle* and *Oil* play important roles as symbols. The Candle represents the *Light of Christ*, the Word of God. This light was given to us at our Baptism; we were to hold it on a lamp stand. We had to let it enliven and shine in our lives.

In Baptism, we are consecrated to Divine Partnership with that same Oil. I like to think that the Virgins (from Matthew 25) are every one of us; the foolish ones just did not bother about carrying forth in life this Oil and Light which they had all received through their Baptism.

- Baptism is an act of worship.
- Baptism is a reminder that we cannot save ourselves, a gift from God.
- Baptism is an external expression of an internal reality.
- Baptism publicly announces that we are not ashamed of Christ.

Faith is a choice.... "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." "*Ich aber und mein Haus wollen dem HERRN dienen*" Amen.

November 8, 2020