

I

Shortly after midnight, in the wee hours of May 12, 2011, I found myself sitting on a chair, staring a door. On the other side of that door, my wife Amy was being tended to by a whole team of doctors and nurses as she prepared to deliver our twin boys, and I was waiting for someone to bring me some scrubs so that I could go through the door and be by her side. I don't know if it registered with me at the time, but looking back on it now, that door was a significant threshold in my life. That door represented a boundary, a place that metaphorically marked what was from what would come to be. For once I cross through that door, no matter what happened next, my life would never be the same again.

II

Life is full of those kinds of threshold moments, isn't it? Life is full of those markers that delineate what came before and what came after. Those moments when we pause and reflect about where we've been, and we wonder about where we might go.

And when we come to our story this morning, we find the people of God standing at just such a threshold place.

III

This Fall, we are reading and preaching our way through the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. We aren't going verse by verse or even book by book, but we're following the broad arc of the story of God and God's

people as told by our ancestors in faith.

When we meet the Israelites in our story for today, after centuries of living as slaves in Egypt, after a terrifying escape from Pharaoh's chariots through the waters of the sea, after decades spent living in the desert, after years of war and struggle with powerful nations, it's finally move-in day. God's people are finally standing at the doorstep of the Land of Promise.

The mantle of leadership has been passed from Moses to a man named Joshua, and Joshua is about to send the people of God to their ancestral homes. After years of struggle and hardship and wandering, the people of God are about to wander no more. But before they go, Joshua calls the whole people of God together for a meeting.

And that leads us to our text for today. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Joshua, chapter 24, verses 1-24.

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir

to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.[a] When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness for a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then King Balak, son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. I sent the hornet[b] ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

‘Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put

away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 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; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’

Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’

But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, we will serve the Lord!’ Then Joshua said to the people, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.’ And they said, ‘We are witnesses.’ He said, ‘Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.’ The people said to Joshua, ‘The Lord our God we will serve, and him we

will obey.’ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. Joshua said to all the people, ‘See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.’ So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This was, in a sense, a congregational meeting. But it wasn’t a congregational meeting about buildings and budgets and such. The subject of this meeting was to talk about their very identity as God’s people. And Joshua begins by reminding the people of everything that God has done to bring them to this point.

It was God who heard their cries in Egypt. It was God who struck Egypt with plagues and led the people out. It was God who parted the Red Sea while the people walked through on dry land. It was God who fed them in the desert. It was God who gave them the law around which they could build a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. It was God who went before them every step of the way. Joshua may have fit the battle of Jericho, as the song says, but it was God who brought the walls a tumblin down.

And then, Joshua delivers the

punchline.

‘Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 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; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’

As the people are standing there with their bags packed, standing on the threshold, ready to enter into the land of promise, there’s a simple reality that Joshua wants to make sure the people understand. Everybody serves somebody or something. So before the people go start unpacking their boxes and hanging curtains, they need to decide which god they’re going to serve.

As theologian Bob Dylan one points out,

You may be an ambassador to England or France

You may like to gamble, you might like to dance

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed

You're gonna have to serve somebody,

It may be the devil or it may be the Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Joshua says, “Choose ye this day

whom ye will serve, as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

IV

My friend, perhaps you find yourself this morning standing at a threshold of sports this morning. Perhaps you find yourself standing at a point where what comes next will look markedly different from what has come before.

Maybe you're about to change jobs or start a new career, or maybe you're at the threshold of retirement. You're reflecting about where you've been, and you're wondering about what will come next.

Or maybe you're at a threshold moment in your family life. Maybe you're engaged to be married or maybe you're expecting a child. Or maybe your marriage is ending or you're grieving someone close to you. Maybe your entire household is standing at a threshold, and you know that what comes next will look nothing like what has come before.

Or maybe, my friend, you're becoming aware that you may soon be facing the threshold, the move from this life into the life to come. Maybe you're becoming more and more aware that there are more years behind you than ahead of you. Maybe tasks of daily life that were once routine and automatic are now anything but. And you find yourself approaching a threshold, a boundary marker of this life.

My friend, if you find yourself at a threshold this morning, I pray that you

will remember this story, and remember who and whose you are. For my friend, God did not bring you this far just to abandon you at the doorstep.

My friend, God has called you. God has provided for you. God has given you the gift of God's law. God has fought and won battles for you. So as you prepare to cross this threshold, choose for yourself and your house this day whom you will serve.

Maybe you're becoming aware that as you age, some of your choices are becoming more limited. Maybe tasks of daily living that used to be simple and routine are now anything but.

If that's you, if you are standing on a threshold this morning, I pray that you will hear these words from Joshua this morning with fresh ears. I pray that you will remember who and whose you are. I pray that you will remember that we worship and serve a God who is faithful, and generous, and trustworthy. I pray that you will remember that God has been with you from the moment you drew your first breath until now, and God will be with you as you exhale your last breath. God will never, ever, leave you alone. So as long as there's a breath in your body, don't be afraid to worship and serve the Lord.

But my friend, whatever threshold you're facing this morning, beware of the false gods who compete for your worship and devotion. And beware that when we're at those threshold moments of life, when we're aware that something is about to change and we're aware that the future

will look markedly different from the past, that's when we're often most tempted to turn away from God and worship something or someone else.

My friend, don't forget that the God who created you and redeemed you and sustains you is a jealous God.

That's quite a concept, isn't it? The God who made all that is, seen and unseen, the God who sets the stars on their courses in the heavens, the God who knows the number of grains of sand on the shore, gets jealous about us.

But the truth is, jealousy is only an emotion you feel about things you care about. If you do not care about something, you won't be jealous about it. My friend, God loves you so much that it makes God jealous when you turn away to follow other gods. So choose ye this day whom ye will serve.

V

As a people, we find ourselves standing at a threshold in human history. Just about everyone I talk to and everything I read suggests that we are all living through a massive threshold moment together. The whole world is going through massive shifts in economics and politics. We are living in the midst of a revolution in communications technology. There is more computing power in the smart phone in your pocket or purse than what took the Apollo astronauts to the moon and back.

Our church just began our third century of mission and ministry, and the

next 100 years of our congregation's will almost certainly look very different than the 200 that preceded them.

And if that's true, then the choices that we make today are important ones. For it is God who has called us into being. It is God who has delivered us and brought us this far together. It is God who has provided for us with such incredible generosity, so that today, we live in a house we did not build, and we reap the fruits of plants that we did not sow. It is God who has given us his Word around which we might build a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. It is God who so loved us that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have life, and life in abundance.

So let us put away all of the false gods that compete for and demand our allegiance. Let us to remember that our ultimate allegiance, our ultimate worship, our ultimate devotion, is only to the Lamb.

And so as we stand here at this threshold together, who or what are we going to serve?

For you might be ambassador to England or France, you might like to gamble, you might like to dance, but you're gonna serve somebody. It might be the devil, it might be the Lord, but you're gonna serve somebody.

So choose this day whom you will serve, as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.