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Joshua 24:1,2,14-18
IT'S TIME TO MAKE A CHOICE

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What wonderful readings we have for our service today. I have preached on all of them a number of times and all of them have so much to say. They all involve making choices. As long as we are in this world, Satan, the world and our own sinful flesh will try to lead us away from God and his Word. We will get angry when we hear that we are sinners. We get angry when we hear that we cannot get right with God by our own efforts. We get angry when we are told that we need a Savior. We get angry when we are told that our only hope is Jesus. We can continue to follow Jesus or we can walk away.

Our Gospel reading is the end of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. After the feeding of the 5000, the people wanted to make Jesus their bread king who would feed their bellies by giving them anything that their hearts desired. Jesus told them that they needed much more than food for their bodies. They needed food for their souls. They needed him, the very Bread of Life who came down from heaven. The people understood what Jesus was saying and they didn't like it. We hear the sad words that many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer followed him. We see that Jesus' teaching does offend. It is also important to note that Jesus does not go running after them, promising that he would change his message to something more palatable for their taste. He simply turns to the Twelve and asks, "You don't want to leave too, do you?" Simon Peter then answers with the beautiful confession, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!"

Our second reading also involves making a choice. Will we treat marriage and human sexuality as God intended or will we make up our own definitions? You know that the Supreme Court recently defined marriage to something more than a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman. You can now have two men or two women. I believe that if you use their definition, you will eventually add more than one spouse and who knows what else. Even among Christians, people bristle and get angry about submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives don't want to submit to their own husbands and husbands don't want to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

So should we be shocked when we see that millions of people are now exposed by Ashley Madison's files? We have been told that "Life is short. Have an affair!" We buy into the idea that there are a lot of victimless crimes. There is nothing wrong with pornography. It may even help a marriage. So might an affair. We see the sad truth. These things hurt everyone. They hurt the spouse. There are consequences and they are very sad ones. Some marriages have dissolved. Others are seriously on the rocks. Families have broken up and there are certainly no winners. We can choose to follow God's blueprint for marriage or we can make up our own. To do so is something very dangerous.

That brings us to our text this morning. Joshua had seen an awful lot during his lifetime. He had been born in Egypt where his people had been slaves. He would become Moses' right hand man. He was one of the spies sent out to search the Promised Land. While the other spies came back with the report that they were doomed because the other people were too strong and powerful, he and Caleb saw this as the golden opportunity. The LORD God of Israel was with them. The victory was already theirs! The people chose to believe the other spies. Therefore Israel would wander

in the desert for 40 years until that generation would die out. They would travel to the brink of the Promised Land. Moses would die before they would enter. The Lord would bury Moses.

Now the leadership would fall to Joshua. He and Caleb would be the only two of the original generation to enter the Promised Land. Joshua would encourage the people to take possession of the Land. God was giving them the land. If they would listen to the Lord, their enemies could not stand before them. If they did not listen to the Lord, then they would not keep that land. Their enemies would conquer them. What would they do? Like the Israelites, we see that IT'S TIME TO MAKE A CHOICE.

Joshua was about to die. The Lord had given him a good, long life. He was 110 years old. He spent 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in the wilderness and now 30 as the leader of the people. He had much to say to his people. Like all pastors and leaders of God's people he had preached and taught and encouraged and prayed and loved his people. He wanted them to remain faithful to God. He knew that if they made the wrong choice, it would be absolutely fatal to their souls.

He will review their salvation history. He will speak of God's love to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He will speak of God's deliverance from Pharaoh and his army at the Red Sea. He will remind them that they are now living in that land because God gave it to them, not because they were so good and faithful, but because God is gracious. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He gives us the very opposite of what we deserve.

Joshua truly loved his people, but he knew that he could not make them remain faithful to God. They would have to make a conscious choice to do that. When we speak of making a choice here, we are not talking about decision theology. By nature we cannot choose God because we are spiritually blind to truth, dead in our sins and enemies of God. We can choose to remain with God or we can choose to walk away. Sadly it is possible to fall from faith. We will see what happened to Israel after the death of Joshua. It wasn't pretty. Remember that it was many of Jesus' disciples who turned back and no longer followed him. This text has been preached at many a confirmation. You know that many of those young people who stood before the Lord's altar wearing white robes sadly no longer attend church or have anything to do with God.

Why does this happen? Very simply because people choose to worship idols. Do you view idols as objects of wood or stone, shaped in the form of fish or lizards or apes? Well, I suppose that some people might worship such things, but real idolatry is anything that takes the place of God. We have idols called "self," "convenience," "pleasure" and many more. It affects each and every one of us. There is the temptation to leave God and worship something else, something much more to our sinful liking.

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the LORD." We are to fear the LORD. We are to stand in awe of him, to honor him and to give him allegiance. We are to trust him, love him and worship him. This is the God of the covenant. This is the God who promised a Savior. This is the God who led Israel for those forty years through the wilderness, providing manna from heaven every day, making sure that the people's clothing and shoes did not wear out, giving them victory over all their enemies. This is the God who did not treat his people as their sins deserved, but forgave iniquity, transgression and sin for the sake of his love.

They are to serve him. They are to worship, trust, love, and obey him. The word "serve" is used seven times by Joshua in this text. They are to serve him "with all faithfulness." Their fear and serving is to be for the LORD alone. God will not share his glory with idols, with cheap imitations.

There must have been families who still had these idols of wood and stone. They hid them in their tents. They were trying to cover all their bases. If the Lord wasn't doing what they wanted, then they could turn to these idols. These were the old idols. But there were other idols in the Promised Land, idols that had been worshiped by the previous residents. Might these gods have some merit? Even though the Canaanites had been defeated totally by the people of Israel, the people found their gods intriguing. These gods gave the people a lot of sexual freedom, incorporating it into the worship services. That certainly sounded better than saving oneself for marriage and not committing adultery. If we look at it, nothing really has changed. The same temptations are there for us today.

"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve..."The people would have to make a choice. Last week we spoke about the banquets set by Wisdom and Folly. They used the same words but they were totally different. Wisdom had prepared a beautiful banquet of salvation. Folly had prepared simple bread and water, leading to destruction. We cannot let ourselves be fooled by Satan and his empty promises. They always sound good, but they never deliver. They do not bring us freedom and life. They bring slavery and death. Ashley Madison's customers are not doing so well. The idea of having an affair is not so exciting now. Some people have committed suicide as their infidelity is exposed.

Yes, such things can happen to us as well. If we play with fire, we are going to get burned. If we think that we can serve God and idols at the same time, we are wrong. No man can serve two masters. We are faced with this choice every single day of our lives. As we live our lives, spend our money, use our talents, we are choosing whom we serve. We know that there are many times that we decided to worship and serve someone or something other than the Lord.

"But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." This was not braggadocio here. Joshua had experienced the Lord's love and faithfulness throughout his life. He knew that even though there had been many times when he had sinned and was not faithful to God, that God had forgiven him and was still faithful to him in his gospel promises. Whether he was a spy, or Moses' right hand man or leader of the nation, God was always with him. He had served the LORD and would continue to do so.

The people would promise that they would worship the LORD and him alone. They would fail as their history would show. Peter would make a bold confession, yet he would curse and swear that he had never heard of any Jesus of Nazareth. Many confirmands make that promise as well. We cannot lean on our own strength. We will fail. Satan is too powerful for us to take on by ourselves. We must stay grounded in Word and sacrament, leaning on God for the strength we need. It is a battle we will face every day of our lives.

Sadly, many will leave the Lord for other gods of their own minds. They will leave for pleasure and self. They will be people we know and love. They are members of our church body, our congregation, even our family. We always pray that they will return. We must make a choice. May we stand with Joshua and say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" AMEN