

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

FREED FROM AN IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

1Then 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. 2And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel:

. . . 14"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.

15Now 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." 16Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 17for 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; 18and 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."

[19But 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. 20If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” 21And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” 22Then 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.” 23He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” 24The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” 25So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. 26Joshua 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. 27Joshua 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.” 28So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.]

DIAGNOSIS: Old Confidence

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Overly Confident*
Joshua prompted the tribes of Israel to make a choice: “Which god will you serve?” Like children who promise they will keep their rooms clean, make their beds, do the dishes and always obey their parents, the tribes of Israel make a promise they will not keep. “We will serve YHWH,” they said. But that’s not the way it turned out. It didn’t take long for Israel to “serve other gods,” specifically the gods of prosperity. (Read the story in the Book of Judges.) Not only that; it seems the

pattern of overconfidence has continued throughout history. (Witness the promise an early follower made to Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." Or the vows of confirmands and ordinands since then.)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Confident in Self*

Those tribal promisers no doubt were sincere when they made their promise to serve YHWH. They were certain they would serve YHWH and YHWH alone. Even when Joshua told them that they wouldn't be able to do it, that they didn't have it in them, that they wouldn't be able to follow through (v. 19), they insisted, "No, we will serve the Lord." They were confident all right. But their problem was that their confidence was in themselves, not in YHWH. No wonder they weren't able to serve YHWH alone and "served other gods." No wonder they kept going back to the prosperity gods. When one's trust is in one's self, it's easy to serve whatever looks good to one's self at the time.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Convicted*

The stone that Joshua set up (v. 26) was not only a reminder to the people of their vow; it became an inescapable reminder to them of their failure. It convicted them. The stone functioned like a mirror, the same way the tablets of stone God gave to Moses function for us. It's as if those stone mirrors have a Voice: "The worst of it is not that you've failed to keep your self-confident promises. It's that, in doing so, you've rejected the only God who loves you. Instead, you have chosen gods who cannot do for you what you hoped they would. Moreover, even if they give you prosperity, they cannot give you the life you hoped would come with prosperity—and now you're stuck. Worst of all, if you will not trust me, you're going to stay stuck because the gods you've chosen will never be able to give you life. And that means you end up with no life at all." So said

the stone that Joshua set up at Shechem; so say the stone tablets to us today that were given at Sinai.

PROGNOSIS: New Confidence

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Freed*

But there is another Stone (Rock, if you will), also from God, and this Rock does give life. This is the Rock that Paul will later say followed those tribes through the wilderness, keeping them alive (1 Cor. 10). It is the Rock who is Christ Jesus.

This Rock gives life still today—to us, too. Unlike the mirror-like stones of Sinai and Shechem (also from God), this Rock does not finally condemn us for our reneging on self-confident promises we've made. This Stone does not condemn us for making choices that put us in opposition to the God who created us.

This Rock does not even wait for us to make a choice that we don't have it in us to make. Instead, he makes the choice. The choice he makes is to do whatever it takes for us to live, whatever it takes to free us from the sentence Joshua's stone spoke on those tribes and that those (God-given) stone tablets speak on us. It's a choice he knew would cost him his flesh. And that's what he willingly gave. (Cf. today's Gospel, John 6: "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.")

The choosing is all his. This Rock is not one set up to remind us of a choice we have made. This Rock is one that demonstrates God's choice.

On account of this Rock (and his having been raised from the dead), we can trust that God's choice is to give us life—life that is based on the forgiveness of sins, forgiveness even for the self-reliant choices for which we deserved to be convicted by God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Confident in*

Him

His choice sets us free, not only from the eternal consequences of our own deadly choices; it also sets us free from thinking that we have only ourselves to trust. The tribes of Israel had to hear again and again of the steadfast love of YHWH in order to be set free from the deadly results of their self-confidence. Jesus offers us himself, again and again, in the flesh (risen as he is) to set us free. When the Holy Spirit gets it through to us how trustworthy Jesus' promise is, we find ourselves trusting him, even in spite of ourselves. Self-confidence, that unreliable companion, gets replaced with confidence in Jesus and his promise to us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Serving, Confident in Him*

The inevitable result of trusting Jesus is that we follow his lead in serving YHWH through serving others. We serve, not because we're so conscientious at following through on commitments we have made, but because he followed through for us. When we trust that Good News, how can we do otherwise?