

Thirteenth Sunday after Whitsunday

Psalm 84

Joshua 24:15-25

Ephesians 6:10-20

Joshua is approaching the end of his life. He was grayer, slower, frail. He had a long and storied career as leader of God's people. Joshua grew up a slave in Egypt—living in oppression and bondage. He was inspired as a young man by a man named Moses who gave God's people hope for a life free from slavery. Following the exodus from Egypt, Joshua was charged by Moses to lead a militia in the first battle against their enemies—a big deal for a people who hadn't had an army for generations. He was by Moses' side as he ascended Mount Sinai to commune with God and receive the first set of the Ten Commandments.

And he was present when they descended from the mountain to see the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf. And when Moses approached death, God appointed Joshua to succeed Moses as leader of the Israelites. Joshua had reached the age, tradition says of 110, and was entering his final days.

After decades of hardships and war, the people of God had finally conquered the Promised Land and secured it for themselves. Joshua's final act was to divide the land around the twelve tribes of Israel. Joshua gathers the heads of the tribes, the judges of the people, the officers and priests. He gathers the people of God in preparation for this historic event.

And here's what Joshua said, what we didn't read this morning, People of God: here is what God has done for you: God took your father Abraham and led him through all the land of Canaan—and despite the odds, God made his offspring many and the nation grew. God gave him Isaac, and to Isaac, God gave him Jacob. And Jacob and his children went to Egypt and grew. And when the tables turned and you became enslaved, God sent Moses and Aaron and God plagued Egypt with all that God did and afterwards God brought us out—freed us!

And when God brought our ancestors out of Egypt, and we arrived at the sea with the Egyptians with chariots and housemen at our back, God led us through the waters and covered our enemies with the sea. God fed us when we were hungry. Led us when we were lost. With each approaching enemy, God protected us until we reached this land—a land we did not labor, a town we did not build, with vineyards and groves we did not plant, yet it is ours.

Joshua told of the works of God—of the history of God—of all of the good the people have received by God.

Then, Joshua—makes his final request to the people of God—Choose who you will serve. Choose and do not delay in this—for the stakes are high. Choose. Do you serve the God of our people—YHWH—the Lord—or do you serve another? Decide now and be confident. As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord, YHWH, God.

The people, of course, answer—far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it was the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery, who did great things in our sight. It is God who has protected us along the way. We choose to serve God.

You have read the statistics. You have heard the headlines. Religion in decline. Christianity in trouble. According the new data released by Pew Research last spring, Christians are declining both as a share of the U.S. population and in total number. Within Christianity, Mainline Protestants (that would include us) is declining at a more rapid pace than every before. The decline of Christian adherents in the United States is in concert with the continued rise in the share of Americans with no religious affiliation (the religion nones)—those who self-identify as atheists or agnostics, or ‘nothing in participate.’” One in five of these ‘nones’ were raised as Christians.¹

A look closer would reveal that all five New England states find themselves in the top ten of the ‘least religious states’.² However, that data was compiled.

Don’t stock up on water and food just yet. Don’t panic. Christianity is still a major world player in the global faith community. Christianity as a whole is still a larger part of the religious landscape in the United States. Nonetheless, these facts, these headlines cause all of us to wonder and perhaps fear the future.

I am part of the so called ‘none’ generation—that age group of twenty and thirty somethings that are increasingly identifying with no religion or spirituality. And I feel it.

Among my peers, my friends, I am quite the oddity. I am a person of faith, and not just any faith, but organized faith, a Christian—most days. And even more wild and curious I am a professional one—a person of faith who somehow, someway ended up here in a fancy robe singing hymns and praying prayers while many of peers sit at brunch.

There is almost never a dinner party or barbecue when someone doesn't ask about my being a minister, or even being a person of faith. Perhaps you can relate—people church people, too. And I imagine, that as religious adherence declines, you and I might become stranger and more curious to others.

Time and time again I am asked, why do you bother with all of that? Do you really believe in God?

And I pause, because sometimes I don’t know what to say. In these moments I feel that I am the apologetic for the Christian Faith. That I alone, in that conversation hold all of the responsibility to defend people of my faith, people of any faith.

¹ Data taken from *5 key findings about the changing U.S. religious landscape*, of the Pew Research Center.

² Data taken from 2014 Gallup Poll www.gallup.com/poll/167267/mississippi-religious-vermont-least-religious-state.aspx

Of course, it would be easier to make excuses. To crack a joke regarding religious humor. Or to outright deny it.

Instead, I find myself channeling our ancestors gathered with Joshua that day and I begin to list a litany. Like Mary and her magnificat, I perform an overture of the works of God.

I tell them that I believe it was God, the message and values of the God of Moses and Aaron who inspired people of faith to struggle, fight, work to break down systems of injustice, who inspired Sojourner Truth, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King.

I tell them that I believe it was God, the message and values of the God of Peter and Paul who gave Christians the courage and strength to stand up against Nazi atrocities, to risk their own lives for those who we're unlike them.

I tell them that I believe it was God, the message and values of the God of Mary and Jesus, who inspires flocks of people of faith to call the state house, march in front of city hall, write Op-Eds and open their hearts to ensure all people have access to affordable health care, housing—just a roof, and enough food in their bellies so that no one hungers.

I tell them that I believe in God, in the God who inspired Jesus and the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers.

I tell them that I believe in God, in the God who those early Christians followed who believed—really believed that through God the barriers that separated them enslaved and free, Jew and Greek, women and men—could fall—the barriers that separate all of us today—would fall.

I tell them about you. About Marie and Anne. I tell them about Heinrich and Judy and Paul. I tell them about Orian and Caroline and Jim. I tell them about you because in you, in your stories, in your actions, in your love I have caught the slightest glimpse of the divine.

I tell them I believe in the God who, somehow, somehow, has worked through human hands and hearts and voices to say to me—to say to others—you are loved and you are worthy.

I doubt. I question. And more days than not, it is hard to muster up the courage and strength to claim my faith. And I am sure that among those gathered with Joshua that day were ones who were just as unsure, just as unclear.

But as I recant the works of God in human history, or sing of the workings of God through human hands in my own life, those who ask, wonder in amazement at this curious thing called faith.

And perhaps more importantly, I am reminded of those works and reminded why I care, why I choose this wild and curious path everyday.

Reminded that we are not alone. We have each other alongside us and God among us.

So with the words of our ancestors on my tongue, I say: “Far be it from me that I should forsake our God; for it is the Lord our God who walks alongside us, inspires those among us, and who did those great signs in our sight.”³ Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Joshua 24:15-25