

OSLC Sermon – 08 26 18
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69

Grace to you and peace...

As a general rule, Lutherans aren't big on "decision theology." We are quite clear (and generally grateful) that our relationship with God is based on grace alone, not based on our ability to make the right choice. The incarnation – God's word made flesh – reveals God's determination to *choose us* in love. Confirmation students across the generations have been taught Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with (her) gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith..."

There is nothing we can do to earn or deserve God's love. We bring infants to the waters of baptism because we are convinced that God *chooses them* as beloved for all eternity. So we find ourselves off balance when we hear something like the words of Joshua from our first reading.

"...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."

Choose? Hasn't God already chosen me? And what's the rush – why does the choice need to be made "this day," right now? Can I have some time to think about this decision that I didn't know I had to make?

These words come from Joshua's final charge to the Israelites just before his death. Joshua had taken on leadership of the people following the death of Moses, and now Joshua himself is preparing to die. He has reminded the people of all the ways God has led them and provided for them, from God's first claim on Abraham's life, through their slavery in Egypt and Moses leading them out of bondage through the wilderness, and into the promised land. Now, having reminded them of God's faithfulness, Joshua urges them to "revere Yahweh, and serve Yahweh in sincerity and in faithfulness."

Joshua has been sustained by God's providential covenant throughout his life. He knows that the people will be tempted to follow other gods, because they are surrounded by people who worship the local gods of the land. This is Joshua's last chance to share his own faith with the people – the faith that has given him meaning and comfort, courage and strength throughout his life. He has led this people according to God's ways, and now, with his last breath he longs to know that they will continue in faithfulness as God's chosen ones.

The question of choice seems to be present in John's gospel reading as well. After five weeks of Jesus as the bread of life, apparently this week it's just too much to swallow.

Remember that Jesus fed the 5000 on a grassy mountainside up from the Sea of Galilee, right around the time of the Passover. With just five barley loaves and two fish from a boy in the crowd, Jesus blessed, broke, and distributed the bread and fish to the people, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, Jesus

commanded the disciples to gather up the fragments, that nothing would be lost...and they gathered 12 baskets full. What could be better than a holy man who provides for your gnawing hunger? Jesus, aware that the crowd intended to make him their king by force, slipped away deeper into the mountainside.

The relentless crowd pursued Jesus for the sake of bread, and in a lengthy discourse Jesus has been trying to open their minds to understand what it means that Jesus himself is the true bread from heaven. The Word made flesh in the incarnation offers himself as the life sustaining nourishment that the people need. Inviting them into a far deeper relationship than simply “food service” Jesus uses graphic images of gnawing his flesh and drinking his blood to describe the mutual abiding of Jesus in them and them in him.

The crowds have followed thus far, enticed by the bread and desperate for the healing, but finally it becomes just too much. “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” And many no longer followed him. Turning to the Twelve, Jesus offers them a choice: Do you also wish to go away?

Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, responds on behalf of all who follow Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

There are lots of gods clamoring for our devotion. There is the god of success or achievement – the god who entices us with promises of satisfaction, but is never quite filled up. There is the god of security, who turns us in on ourselves, fearful of anyone or anything that might be a threat. The god of comfort is a delight to follow, so long as you don’t look too deeply. The god of self-

righteousness loves to fill us with indignation at anyone who challenges our opinions. And the god of certainty mocks us if ever a sliver of doubt stirs our thoughts.

Just as Joshua recognized the many gods the Israelites might choose to follow, so Jesus knows our temptations. But none of those other gods will ever be able to fill our deepest hunger and thirst for a rich and authentic life that endures. And so he offers his very self; his own flesh and blood, dwelling in us full of grace and truth.

Alison and Jared have embodied for us this morning the choice that lies before each one of us. These two, having been nurtured by the body of Christ in this place, made the choice to bring their daughter, Lucia, to the waters of baptism, where she is washed into the family of Christ. The choices of their parents before them set each of them on the way of Christ. Each step of the way they had the option of turning back, turning away from the God of their families, but eventually their paths brought them to this place, where they met one another and joined their lives in marriage. Today they have chosen to set Lucia on the path of life that has sustained them thus far.

Responding to God's promise of new life in Christ, they seek that life for their daughter. In response to God's promise in Jesus, they have chosen to respond with promises of their own: to live among God's faithful people, to teach Lucia the way of Christ, share in word and meal, and work for justice and peace in all the world. And we have made promises too – to support Alison and Jared in their promises, and to nurture and pray for Lucia in her life of faith.

We cannot, by our own understanding and strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called us through the gospel, enlightened us with (her) gifts, made us holy and kept us in true faith... but we do get to gnaw on the Word of God made flesh and drink in the vitality of Christ's lifeblood, poured out for the sake of the world God so loves.

To choose the way of Christ is to turn away from other gods and their false promises. It is to turn towards the God who chose you, and who has loved you and all creation from the beginning of time. It is to be held in the love made manifest in the body of Christ, now and forever. Good choice.

Amen.