

COVENANT RENEWAL SUNDAY – Joshua 24:1-2a, 6-7, 13-15, 21-22  
 Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas (December 30) 2012

<sup>24</sup> <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, ... <sup>6</sup> “I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. <sup>7</sup> And when they cried 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 in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness a long time. <sup>13</sup> I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.’

<sup>14</sup> “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

<sup>21</sup> And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the Lord.” <sup>22</sup> 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.”

The setting: Joshua has decided to have a *Covenant Service* with the people of Israel, at Shechem, a place dripping in tradition for his people. He didn’t pick Shechem by accident.

- That’s where Abraham was promised by the LORD God YHWH that the land of Canaan would be given to him and his descendants
- where Jacob made his camp and later caused his wife’s family to put away all their cultic god idols
- -- where Joseph was thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers, and where his bones were later brought for burial after his reign in Egypt. It’s a great place for what Joshua planned to do there.

I’ve talked to some people who don’t like this Covenant Service at Shechem because Joshua says: As for me and my household, we will ...”

They think that it's too patriarchal ... to much the man telling everyone in his house how they are going to do it and assuming that they will do it.

I won't deny that in Joshua's day that is pretty much how it was perceived. But I see it being lived out in a different way now.

I see two old men ... many of you saw them, right here, on All Saint's Sunday.

Dr. Jim Spencer and Dr. Sam King. Dr. King made his way clear across the sanctuary to "pass the peace" with Dr. Spencer, on Dr. Spencer's first trip back to church in a long time – due to health issues.

These two old men were together – sharing their peace with one another – even though, with their diminished hearing, everyone in the whole sanctuary got to "eavesdrop."

It was in that moment that I was inspired to see what Joshua was talking about.

Both of those men chose the Lord God for their households. And then they didn't crack the whip on their spouses or their children. They just lived it out in front of them, for their houses to witness.

And now that both Jim and Sam are at the banquet table together in heaven, we also get to see just how that works. They chose the Lord God for their households by their example, and we see how Jesus gets lived out in the lives of their household members.

**One very important part of the Covenant Service at Shechem was that **THE PEOPLE REMEMBERED** what God had done for them.**

I WONDER if people today still wonder how God has worked in their lives. Do we ever tell the story to one another, or do we just assume that everyone remembers why we are here?

What would you say to your neighbor about how God has worked in your life? Let's just try it. Go ahead. Turn to your neighbor – to someone near you – and tell them / listen to them tell you: how God has worked in your/their life. Go ahead. I'll wait.

I wonder how realistic it was for Joshua to demand that the people make a **TOTAL COMMITMENT to God**. Did he realize just how difficult it is for some folks to even open up to God, and deal with all the problems they have, trying to sort it all out.

- **Joshua** did it in his covenant service.
- **Jesus** said that if we put family, or anything at all, before God's Kingdom, then we miss the boat.
- **John Wesley** said in his covenant service that we have to make a total commitment to God.
- Contemporary Quaker spiritualist **Richard Foster** (who has been read and studied by a lot of United Methodists) said that if we don't seek God's Kingdom first in our lives, then we don't seek it at all.
- **Why so tough? What's the deal?**

God doesn't demand total commitment in order to make it tough on us. God requires total commitment, because that is the only way that we can be in relationship with God. **You can't serve God and let anything else** -- anything else -- stand in the way -- to **be more important**.

Jesus said that if we are not with Him, the we are against him.

There are not grades A, B, C, D or F in the Kingdom of Heaven. It's all PASS/FAIL.

And the wonderful thing about it is that **when we do commit ourselves totally and completely and entirely to God -- that is when all the other problems in life that seem to get in our way -- that distract us from God -- that is when they are all put into proper perspective and we can live abundant lives in spite of them. But we can't do it until we put God first -- totally completely and without qualification.**

It's **sometimes only when people get to the end of their rope** -- when they are barely hanging on -- when it seems like there is no hope -- it's only then, sometimes, that people are willing to turn entirely to God, because they **feel like there is no alternative**. Sometimes it takes a total collapse of all the little gods we worship in life to make us realize how the only thing dependable is God. **He is no fool who gives up what he can't keep in order to gain what he can't lose!**

You see: God requires us to make the commitment to seek God's help and then God begins the process of making our faith and power stronger, so that we can overcome whatever it is that separates us from God.

**Part of the problem with the Church today is that we have been willing to soft-pedal the Kingdom of God. We have been unwilling to tell people the real truth that we must be prepared to give everything. They have to know that there is nothing that they are allowed to hold back. And once they make that decision, then and only then does God give them the power to actually accomplish it.**

But it **takes more than just talking about it** to realize the power of total commitment.

That's one of the reasons why God made us a Covenant people. We don't have to work through these things alone. God knows that we find strength in God best when we share with the people of God.

**FINALLY JUST ONE MORE WORD:** You know, we **don't have to be perfect** to commit ourselves to God. We **only have to want God more than anything else**. And then when we make a commitment to God, that commitment and Holy Living will grow from strength to strength.

That's part of the GLORY and HOPE of our faith.

**Toxic religion** tells us that we need to **WORK HARDER**.

Our **Baptismal Covenant** promises us that **GOD GIVES US FREEDOM AND POWER** to RESIST EVIL, INJUSTICE and OPPRESSION in whatever forms they present themselves. **ALL WE HAVE TO DO** is **ACCEPT THAT FREEDOM AND POWER**.

Make the commitment to **ACCEPT THE FREEDOM AND POWER**. Not do it on our own, by our own strength, our own will power, our own spiritual calisthenics.

Sometimes we forget.

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves again.

Sometimes, like renewing our wedding vows, it's a good thing to **RENEW OUR COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**.

- Let's bring this year to an end remembering how Good our God has been.
- And let's get ready to begin the new year, by once more recommitting ourselves totally to God, because **like a pregnancy we can't do it part way**. We are either in or we are not.