

Teetering on the Verge Joshua 24:1-10, 13-18 (*The Message* trans.)
Saint Marks United Methodist Church 1st Sunday after Christmas [December 29,] 2013

¹⁻² Joshua called together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He called in the elders, chiefs, judges, and officers. They presented themselves before God. Then Joshua addressed all the people:

²⁻⁶ “This is what GOD, the God of Israel, says: A long time ago your ancestors, Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor, lived to the east of the River Euphrates. They worshiped other gods. I took your ancestor Abraham from the far side of The River. I led him all over the land of Canaan and multiplied his descendants. I gave him Isaac. Then I gave Isaac Jacob and Esau. I let Esau have the mountains of Seir as home, but Jacob and his sons ended up in Egypt. I sent Moses and Aaron. I hit Egypt hard with plagues and then led you out of there. I brought your ancestors out of Egypt. You came to the sea, the Egyptians in hot pursuit with chariots and cavalry, to the very edge of the Red Sea!

⁷⁻¹⁰ “Then they cried out for help to GOD. He put a cloud between you and the Egyptians and then let the sea loose on them. It drowned them.

¹³ “I handed you a land for which you did not work, towns you did not build. And here you are now living in them and eating from vineyards and olive groves you did not plant.

¹⁴ **So now:** Be in awe of GOD. Worship him in total commitment. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped on the far side of The the Euphrates River and in Egypt. You, worship GOD.

¹⁵ “If you decide that it’s a bad thing to worship GOD, then choose a god you’d rather serve—and do it today. Choose one of the gods your ancestors worshiped from the country beyond The Euphrates or one of the gods of the Amorites, on whose land you’re now living. As for me and my family, we’ll worship GOD.”

¹⁶ The people answered, “We’d never forsake GOD! Never! We’d never leave GOD to worship other gods.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ “GOD is our God! He brought up our ancestors from Egypt and from slave conditions. He did all those great signs while we watched. He has kept his eye on us all along the roads we’ve traveled and among the nations we’ve passed through. Just for us he drove out all the nations, Amorites and all, who lived in the land.

“Count us in: We too are going to worship GOD. He’s our God.”

“Here we are teetering on the verge. Here we are at a Crossroads. Which way will we go?”

What issue would you fill in here, for our country?

- The beginning of implementation of affordable health care for all Americans?
- Will there be a new minimum wage and what will it be?
- How long will Phil Robertson be suspended from Duck Dynasty?

The “great American statesman and theologian” Woody Allen once put it like this:

“One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”ⁱ

“We are at a Crossroads” tends to be used (a) in political speeches – where we are ALWAYS “at a crossroads,” or “at the hinge of history,” or “blah, blah, blah,” AND

(b) in historians' ex post facto summaries (e.g. Rosa Parks refusal to go to the back of the bus) where something unexpectedly becomes a watershed moment.

But, for most of us "crossroads" / "teetering on the verge" moments are ultimately very personal

I don't know what historians will say was Nelson Mandela's "crossroads moment" in the shaping of South Africa's destiny. But I'm pretty sure, based on my experiences in leading such, that a crossroads experience in the life of Ditchen will be his NorthEast Jurisdiction Mission Of Peace trip to South Africa

- (1) Most Crossroads experiences require choices: our most difficult decisions are **not just** what we do, **but what such a decision then requires that we refuse to do**
- (2) Most of the great personal moments in life – even in non-Italy Europe, where they claim Christian belief, but practice actual, cultural atheism – happen **in the context of worship**.
 - a. Baptism
 - b. Confirmation
 - c. Marriage
 - d. Repeat of the above for younger generations
 - e. Funerals
 - f. AND MOST of these **require PROMISES**
- (3) At Shechem, Joshua combined (1) decision making, (2) worship context, and (3) promise making (as well as reminder of past failures)

It's a worship experience that is far different from many American 21st century worship experiences.

He slips in just as the organist is beginning the prelude and glances at his watch. Why couldn't they start at 10:45? If they had a head start they could beat the Baptists to Shoneys. He likes the chiming of the hour. He thinks of it as the tardy

bell that says you are officially late. He has never cared for all of the candles. They are a little Catholic for his taste. He yawns during the reading of the Psalm. He usually likes the choir, but the call to worship is a little disappointing.

When the registration of attendance notebook is passed, he usually writes other people's names. Over the last four Sundays, he's written Julia Roberts, Pat Sajak, Sasha Obama and Justin Bieber. Someone has to notice eventually.

The first hymn, "Unless This Day Be Holy," seems like a high church hymn. That's why they have **Episcopal churches**. "Worthy of Worship" sounds low church. That's why they have **yuppie churches**. During the children's sermon he hopes some child will say something the pastor does not want to hear. It does not happen nearly often enough.

He has never been big on litanies. He does not come to worship to participate, although the Lord's Prayer is not bad. He is used to mumbling it. The anthem is a winner, but the scripture reading goes on forever. Who reads twenty-six verses from Joshua? Who cares about the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites or Jebusites? It is enough to make you long for John 3:16.

The sermon starts slow and drags in the middle, but he likes it when the introduction and conclusion are close together. He is sure the closing hymn, "Higher Ground," is somebody's grandmother's favorite, but it is not his. He looks at his watch and then around to see if anyone is going to join. He hopes any new members will wait a week, because kickoff is at 1:00.

When the offering plate is passed he **gives money that he will not miss**. He likes the doxology, because it is short, and the benediction because it means we're coming down the home stretch. He leaves the sanctuary thinking, "It could have been worse."

Somehow he has the mistaken impression that worship is a spectator sport. That's why you clap, right?

He has never understood that attending a worship service and worshipping are not necessarily the same.

If you asked him why he comes he would have to think about it for a second.

- If it is to be **entertained, it is not much of a show.**
- If he wants to **learn something, a book is easier.**
- If he is after **self-improvement, then therapy could be more useful.**
- If he wants to **feel comforted, then the Grand Slam Breakfast at Denny's might be a better choice.**
- The truth is, more than anything else, he comes out of habit.

There is a big difference between above described “consumerist worship” where churches scramble to win the competition within a very limited supply, and **worship that changes people.**

- **The former happens when the consumer is in charge.**
- **The latter changes people when God is in charge.**

Today’s “Shechem,” -- Covenant Worship – like in Joshua’s time – calls us to remember the **IMPORTANCE OF WORSHIP itself, for its own sake.**

Not just for the way things flow on Sunday morning, but for how we order our life priorities during the rest of the week. Who really is in charge?

ⁱ The Woody Allen quote comes from a commencement speech he makes to graduates in his classic movie *Annie Hall*.