



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Timing is Everything” **Sermon on Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18**

Donovan A. Drake

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Our text is from the Book of Joshua. Joshua lived right at the time when the people of God needed a leader. Now, you can have a leader who leads with all bluster, a guy who has testosterone for brains. History is riddled with leaders who did things called “Picket’s charge” and “Custer’s last stand.”

But there’s another brand of leadership that has all the right stuff. That was Joshua. Faith, wisdom, captivating charisma. Joshua led the people from the wilderness into the promised land. Joshua fought the Battle of Jericho without a cannon shot, just a trumpet and a shout, “and the walls came a tumblin’ down.” Joshua was a leader who followed; he followed God’s word. God was in charge. And the result was that he led the people of God into a life and a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The right one at the right time. Timing is everything.

Well, the timing of our passage today is Joshua’s farewell address. These aren’t quick words, “See ya.” These are words that he wants to get right. Looking back, looking now, looking towards the future. It’s all about timing.

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18.

Then 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: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

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 house, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for 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; ¹⁸ and 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.”

Back in March or April, I was feeling better about the state we were in. At that time, people were scrambling to be vaccinated. I thought the progression would keep going through the age groups. Adults, youth, then children, and after a challenging year of being apart, we could come back together in communion.

I needed a theme to get all of this rolling, something to have in my head to give me some direction, and then hopefully all of us. I had in mind Joshua’s line that we read today. “Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

After a year of cantankerous bickering over viruses, masks, shutdowns, and politics, it was time to come out of the clear and get back to business, church business. “Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” I was drawn to the words, and what made it all easier was when we chose a date for Kickoff - today. It just so happened that that text with those words were the lectionary text for the day. Amazing! The theme I was going to choose to kick off the fall was actually the Lectionary text! That’s a God thing! God is on this!

We’ll get the Sunday schools up and running. We’ll unveil and celebrate our mission and ministry. We’ll celebrate that because you all gave generously last year; we ended last year with quite a surplus. That’s great, but I remember my mother saying that a church should never have a surplus. A church is not in the business of making money, which made a lot of sense as a kid, but when I became a pastor.... I kind of like having a surplus.

Apparently, the Session was on my mother’s side, and now we have begun giving God’s bounty back to God. Giving it to people and places that will use it up quickly. It’s what we’re called to do! That was going to be some great news we were all going to celebrate on this Kickoff Sunday. Faithful generosity. But as we head into this fall and more pandemic keeps stretching on, and the money isn’t really coming in right now, well, I wonder whether we should give it all away. Or would it be prudent.... Timing is everything.

We had that little window of time, not long ago, where it seemed like we were heading in the right direction. We could see the Promised Land. But now we’re heading back to the wilderness. The hospitals are full. I have members who have waited for rooms. I have members who don’t want to give up their room too soon. So, if

you're planning to have a heart attack, you may want to postpone it for later in the year. Yeah, I'm bitter. I'm angry. I'm frustrated. It's Kickoff Sunday. Timing is everything.

You don't want bitterness or anger in a leader. What a leader needs to have is a plan. Every threat of chaos requires a plan. Plans give us a course of action in times of chaos, but they also give us great comfort.

That's why when you get on an airplane, they do that spiel that says, "May we have your attention. In the unlikely event that there is an emergency..." What they're saying is, "Don't worry. When chaos happens, we have a plan." And it continues, "Masks will fall from the ceiling. As the plane barrels towards the earth, just breathe normally. And if you see we're over water, no need to worry. We've thought of everything. There's a little yellow vest that was manufactured sometime in the early 90's that's sure to work. Just pull the red cord. If for some reason the rip cord doesn't work, we thought of that, too. As you exit orderly from the plane, down the lighted corridor, simply blow into the tube."

That's where their plan ends, and being the leader that I am, I've further developed it to involve getting picked up by a well-timed cruise ship and opting in for the drinks package. In times of chaos, we need to have a plan.

The cold war had a plan with three words, "Duck and cover." It's the antidote for thermal nuclear war. Vietnam had a plan. It was called, "Win." The Exxon Valdez and the Deepwater Horizon had a plan. It was called "Dawn soap." The Kingston, Tennessee Coal Fossil Plant came up with a plan. Just put the coal ash in that yonder pond. Afghanistan had a plan. "Rid the world of evil-doers." And when Plan A didn't work out, Plan B kicked in. We will have "Orderly Withdrawal." Isn't it comforting to have a plan? The politician has a plan. Talk radio has a plan. The scientist has a plan. The economist has a plan. The school board has a plan. The airlines have a plan. What's your plan?

When Joshua said goodbye to his people he said, "Make a plan. Choose this day whom you will serve. You can serve the gods of the wilderness." You remember the gods of the wilderness. There was the god of bitterness. Joshua said, "It's time to make a plan. Choose this day whom you will serve." Is your plan to fill your life with anger, bitterness, fear, hatred? What's your plan? What's your plan for life?

Here's my plan. On this Kickoff Sunday that isn't going as planned, my plan is to stick with the text.

Choose this day whom you will serve. The other gods? No. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

So you will hear Joshua's words a great deal in the weeks and months to come. We are going to explore and be reminded of what it means "to serve the Lord." There was that saying, "What would Jesus do?" It's one thing to say it, it's another to actually look at what Jesus did. We're going to stick with the text, and we are actually going to look at the Lord.

What did Jesus do?

You see, the past year seems like it's been filled with yelling and un-friending people. I don't think Jesus did that. He seemed to spend a lot of time with people who had been unfriended. I read where they actually touched the lepers, which I'm pretty sure the CDC frowns upon. So, what does that mean? I don't know, but let's look at it together. I'm going to lead classes on Zoom that will take us on a slow walk with Jesus through the gospels. We are going to look at Jesus, seek to discern his Word, and look to how we might live it out in these days of chaos.

We need to do this together, an odd hope in these days in which we find ourselves with masked worship. Or masks strongly encouraged for worship. Or outdoor worship. It's an odd hope during these days. We need to be together. Together, we have the hope of Joshua, too. Joshua could have said his words to himself in his family room sometime between turning off the news and picking up a book. "Look, I'm tired of these people. Let them serve whatever they want. If they want to drown in a sea of bitterness and division, so be it. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

But Joshua's plan wasn't for himself. He couldn't say goodbye without leading into the future. He knows that following the Lord means evangelism. You have a strong call to leave no one behind. No one. Joshua gets up and says, "Look at us. All of us. Remember where we've been. Look at what we have. This land. This amazing land, and we have each other. This unity of Spirit is a gift of God." Joshua didn't see himself as a war hero veteran. He saw himself as a veteran of the gift. And a gift of God needs to be given and shared. We are all veterans of the gift. Look at your life, look at this day, the blessing of it, the grace of it, the gift of it.

"Choose this day, whom you will serve... .. but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." What a line that we could use every day. Put it on the steering wheel of your car. The mirror in your bathroom. The screen on your phone. "Choose this day whom you will serve." This day. This day. This day and all your days.

Last night I received an email from a pastor that said, "Donovan, I'm a pastor at the Ellis Grove congregation. The town of Waverly was devastated in today's flood. I contacted the Presbytery and the Presbytery suggested emailing you, which means you!" "As of right now we have untold property damage, hundreds without homes, even more without power and water, and around ten people missing. Please pray for the community. I know that Westminster has a Disaster Response Team."

He knows that Westminster has a Disaster Response Team. What do you think he wants during the chaos - a plan? He wants God to show up. In my life, God tended to show up most surprisingly in you. That is why I love the church.

"Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Timing is everything.

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