



The Hope of Worship

Joshua 24:1-26

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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. And 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.”

“Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.”

“Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the Lord, God put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time.”

“Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you.”

“Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand.

When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you.”

“I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you hadn’t labored, and towns that you hadn’t built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you didn’t plant.”

“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now 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’re living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; 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. God protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 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 God is our God.”

But Joshua said to the people, “You can’t serve the Lord, for God is a holy God. God is a jealous God; God will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then God will

turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.”

And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!”

Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve God.”

And they said, “We are witnesses.”

He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and God we will obey.”

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord.

Joshua said to the people, “See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that God spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.”

He usually slips in after the processional hymn. If he gets here before the choir sits down he considers himself on time. He likes to sit in the back on the side behind a column—in case he wants to close his eyes. For some reason he is early today, but he misses his line “We lift them to the Lord.” It sounds Catholic to him.

He does not read the quote on the front of the order of worship. He thinks you should only look at the

program if you have to. He likes the choir's introit. The choir does such a good job.

He is not big on litanies. He does not come to worship to participate. He has not heard *Come Thou Almighty King* in twenty years, and could have gone another twenty. He does not really care for congregational hymns. He does not want the people around him to hear him not sing.

He mumbles most of the Lord's Prayer, but he likes saying trespasses. The Lord's Prayer is the only chance he gets to say the word trespasses. He yawns during the psalms. All the Psalms sound alike.

The time of confession is a downer. He could skip the silence. He can be silent at home.

He is not a fan of passing the peace. It is awkward to shake hands while the showoffs are hugging. You are supposed to say, "Peace be with you" and respond "And also with you." What do you do when someone goes off script, "How are you?" We are not supposed to talk to each other.

He hopes there are not a lot of announcements. There is a picnic, and he did not eat breakfast.

During the children's time he wishes a child will say something Julia does not want to hear. It does not happen nearly enough.

He likes it when people say their prayer concerns out loud. He is waiting for someone to say something inappropriate—parking spots around the church, steak at the picnic, help for the Supreme Court.

When the offering plate's passes he gives money he will not miss.

The scripture reading before the sermon 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 wish 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 had never heard *Unless this Day Be Holy*. He still has not sung it. He likes the benediction because it means the service is almost done. He has mixed feelings about the postlude. He sort of thinks he should get to leave after the benediction.

He walks out of the sanctuary thinking, "It could have been worse."

He has gotten the mistaken impression that worship is a spectator sport. He does not understand that attending a worship service and worshipping are not the same. Hebrew preachers like Joshua did not have much patience with worshippers like him.

The world was a different place thirty-three centuries ago. Rivers parted so that people could walk across on dry land (Joshua 3:1-17). The heroine in the Book of Joshua is a prostitute (2:1-21). The major holidays were celebrated by making big piles of rocks (4:1-20). Capital punishment involved stoning not only the perpetrator but also his sons, daughters, cattle, donkeys, and sheep. They even stoned the perpetrator's tent (7:22-26).

The huge difference between Ancient Israelites and contemporary Americans is most obvious in the way they approach worship, in the moment when Joshua says to the

Hebrew people: “This is it. You have to choose. Are you going to worship God?”

Worship is not this big a deal for us.

Joshua is a tough old bird. When his fellow spies thought the Canaanites looked like giants, Joshua and Caleb urged the Hebrews to take them on even as their safety-minded compatriots threatened to stone them for their advice. After Moses died and Joshua assumed command, Joshua showed his mettle by trusting God to bring down the walls of Jericho with the sound of trumpets and the shouts of the people.

When Joshua realizes that his days are numbered, he calls Israel together for his farewell address. The Israelites are settling in the Promised Land, but their hearts are unsettled. Some are faithful to Yahweh, the God who led them through the wilderness. Others like the pagan religions that surround them. Most do not take worship seriously. With all the energy a one-hundred-ten-year-old can muster, Joshua challenges the people to make a commitment to God.

He begins with a recitation of history. God was with them, bringing Abraham from the land beyond the river to a new home, leading them out of slavery in Egypt, in the peculiar business with the prophet Balaam and the talking donkey, and this part is strange—with the holy hornet—the panic that helped them find a place in the Promised Land.

The people must decide whether they will serve the gods of the people around them or the God who has been with them every step of the journey.

Joshua says, “It’s time make up your mind. Will you worship God?”

The people say, “Yes, we’ll worship God.”

At this point most preachers say, “That’s great,” but Joshua says, “I don’t believe you. You don’t mean it. You don’t have what it takes. If you worship God you have to pay a price. You have to give your life to God.”

Faithfulness is hard. Responding to God means reordering everything.

When we have a baptism we ask the parents: “Do you desire to have your child baptized into the family of God? Do you promise to encourage your child to receive the love of God? Do you pledge by prayer, word, and example to bring her up in God’s hope?”

What if right in front of God and everybody else we asked, “Do you promise to get her out of bed, and bring her here every Sunday morning for the next eighteen years, even when you’ve had a long week or you’d rather sleep in or go to the beach or there’s a soccer match or when this darling infant has grown into a surly tattooed teenager who thinks church is dumb?” (Talitha Arnold, “True Grit,” *Christian Century*, November 5, 2002, 18).

When we welcome new members, we ask them to recite the Salem Covenant of 1629—which is good—“We covenant with you God, and with one another, and do bind ourselves in your presence, to walk together in all your ways, according as you are pleased to reveal yourself unto us in your blessed word of truth.”

What if we were more specific? “Will you speak to everyone in the church, even if they hurt your feelings? Will you give sacrificially to the church, even when you have a debt? Will you find time to serve God’s people, even if it isn’t convenient?”

Joshua thinks they are taking a serious commitment lightly: “You better mean it. You have to put away the things that compete with God.”

The people say, “We promise.”

So that they will remember what they have pledged in worship, Joshua sets up a stone and says, “Every time you see this rock remember that you’ve given your word.”

Joshua took worship seriously. He got angry when people showed up at a worship service without any intention of real sacrifice. Can you imagine how Joshua would feel about what passes for worship today? People think of worship services as a matter of personal preference. We should not tell people to pick a worship service in which they feel comfortable, because asking God to change us is supposed to be uncomfortable.

Much of what passes for worship is superficial—applause that suggests that the audience is the congregation and not God, the feeling that nothing mysterious is going on, the sense that what is happening is a gathering of nice people enjoying one another’s company.

Edward Farley said that instead of singing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” congregations should sing, “Nice, Nice, Nice,” as that seems to be the goal.

Those who lead worship are told to keep it simple. Avoid anything that is offensive. Offer what one scholar calls “the saccharine substitutes for the hard thinking that Christian faith requires” (Ralph Wood, “In Defense of Disbelief,” *First Things*, October 1998, 28-33)

People get just enough dumbed-down worship to inoculate them from experiencing the real thing. Consumer driven worship leads people to the

misunderstanding that worship is about our likes and dislikes and not about our commitment to God.

Worship is not supposed to be easy. If it was easy, everyone would worship. Genuinely worshipping God is the hardest, most important thing we do. We need to discover and commit our lives, be met by God's forgiveness and encircled by God's love, see the vision of the day yet to come, and the hope of what is yet to be.

She had a hard week. Her life is crowded. She comes to worship to experience the love that makes her whole again. Before the service begins, she reads the quote from Augustine and asks God to make her a worshipper.

When the congregation reads, "May our worship be filled with wonder," she thinks about wonder.

She feels *Come, Thou Almighty King* all the way down to her toes, especially, "Spirit of holiness, on us descend."

During the invocation, she closes her eyes and opens her heart.

When she prays the Lord's Prayer, there's a lump in her throat on "forgive us our trespasses."

She sings "We are God's people" and is grateful for Plymouth Church, and then grateful for Plymouth Church School.

The line in the confession that gets her is "the desire to have our own way in all things." She loves the silence during the confession of sins. Some parts of worship are too deep for words.

She looks forward to the passing of the peace. She likes it when people smile and hug.

She listens carefully to the children's time, and hopes that she can worship like God's child. When Carl talks about listening to scripture, she knows she feels the same way. She thinks about Jesus telling the woman at the well, "The time is here to worship in spirit and truth."

During the prayers of the people she thinks about the concerns she needs to pray about—the environment, the flooding, hunger, poverty, racism, and refugees. When the offering plate is passed she gives more than her CPA wants her to. She knows she is not just giving money, she is sharing herself. She likes the part in the scripture reading where Joshua tells the people of Israel, "Saying something doesn't make it so."

As she listens to the sermon she pictures herself faced with the choice the Hebrew people had to make. What holds her back from a greater commitment? What does it cost her to worship God?

When she sings the last hymn, she prays "to fit the holy visions that thunder in our heart." Her favorite phrase in the benediction is the invitation to "live deep within your soul." She is grateful for the postlude, because it keeps her from hurrying back to life outside of worship.

She lives differently, because she has worshipped, because she has given herself to God. In every worship service each one of us needs to ask, "Did I give myself to God?"

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