

Sermon

Nov. 12, 2017

Based on Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Last week, we remembered the saints who have passed on. Looking at John's description of what heaven will be like, we were invited to let God guide our imaginations, to have visions and dreams of what heaven is like. We can meditate on these visions, draw comfort from them, stir up hope through our times of struggle. We can imagine what the saints that have gone before us are now doing and anticipate the time we will join them.

This week we are going to look at how saints know the story of the faith. They use that story to frame their choice to serve God. Last week, I reminded you that imagination is a powerful ability that we have. Stories have power as well, especially the stories we tell about ourselves. These stories of identity, of who we are and where we belong, impact the choices we make about how we will live. I want us to think today about the stories we tell ourselves and how those stories impact the choices we make in life.

Joshua, the one who followed Moses and led the people into the promised land, gathered the leaders of the people together at Shechem. He begins his address to them by telling them their story, going back to their foundations. He starts by saying, "Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods." He tells them how God chose their father Abraham, calling him to leave his home land and go to a place God would show him, promising that Abraham would have as many descendants as there are stars in the heavens or sand on the sea shore. Joshua speaks of Isaac, Jacob and Esau. He tells them of Moses and Aaron, and how God used them to lead them out of slavery and into freedom.

After retelling their story, of how they had become a people known as Israel, and how they had found themselves in Canaan, to the land promised to them by God who had chosen them to be his people, Joshua then calls the people to make a choice, a choice that rings through the

ages: Choose this day who you will serve, whether the gods of your ancestors, the gods of Canaan, or the God who has claimed you and brought you to this land. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

You can see what Joshua is doing here. He is telling the story in a way that leads up to the challenge for the people to make a choice. This is what stories can do. They help to frame the choices that we have to make about to whom or what we will commit our lives and our loyalty. Joshua has framed for them what God has done for them, how God has blessed them, how God is worthy of their faithful service. Having laid it all out, it makes us wonder how any of them could say “no.” After telling them that their freedom and the land they are standing on was made possible by God’s actions through Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and others, how could the people say, “That’s all well and good, but we are going to stick with the gods of our ancestors” or “We don’t want to offend the gods of this land so we better serve them.” No, it would be ridiculous for them to shrug off God and go with others after all that God had done for them. It is the telling of the story of what God has done that set up the decision to choose whether or not to follow God. Saints, those who choose to serve God, are those who know the story about what God has done for them.

So, what do the people do? They respond to Joshua by telling their version of the story. They spoke of how God delivered their ancestors from slavery, worked amazing signs, protected them in their journey to freedom, drove out peoples before them. They tell their story to support their decision to serve God. They know why they choose to serve God. It was not because their parents served God. It was not because they did not have any other options. It was not because everyone else was doing it. They made their choice because they knew their salvation story, what God had done for them. They knew they were the recipients of God’s amazing grace. They knew how much God loved them. So they made the choice to serve God in response to what God had done for them.

Commitments to causes are made by the telling of stories, especially founding stories. For example, we tell the founding story of our nation so that children will know why they should be responsible

citizens. We tell the story of our founding fathers who took the idea of government based on the consent of the governed rather than the divine right of kings, casting this idea into a great experiment of self-government under the rule of law. We tell of the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the fighting of a war of independence from England, the ratification of the constitution and the bill of rights, all to make the case for why being loyal to the United States is a good choice.

Yesterday, we celebrated Veterans Day, a day when we express our deep and sincere thanks for those who served in the military, expressing their loyalty to America by defending our interests and striving to keep us safe. Although I have not served in the military, my hunch is that those who have were told the story, not only of the founding of America, but the founding of the army, the navy, whatever branch they served in so that they knew what they were a part of and why they should give their loyalty to that branch of the military. Maybe after church those of you who did serve can tell me whether my hunch is correct.

Advertisers are master story tellers. In thirty seconds they at least attempt to convince us to commit our money to their product or service by telling us a story. Just as an example: I was sitting on the couch yesterday watching college football. Northwestern Mutual reminded me that putting together all the financial and insurance pieces to protect my family and achieve my financial goals can be confusing. Having presumed to tell me my story about aspects of my life, they offered their services to help me figure out my financial and insurance puzzle. Unfortunately, for them, I was not convinced because the story they told about me isn't true. I am not confused about my financial and insurance pieces.

And that's another thing about stories that are told in order to lead to commitment. The story being told needs to be true for it to be convincing. If the stories told about the founding of America don't include your ancestors, or the experiences of self-government doesn't reflect your experience, then maybe the call to commitment to America lacks force. If the phrase "liberty and justice for all" does not reflect your own history, then the call to commit to a government that says it

offers this is less convincing. It may be true for others, but it isn't true for you.

This leads to an important insight: we have the power to tell our own stories. The experiences, the history, the founding stories of your ancestors, your family, your community, your church, your people, your nation, these are the stories that you can tell. These are the stories, your stories, that promise to provide the most power in calling for your commitment, your loyalty, your sacrificial service. If you can find yourself somehow in the story of America, then the American story is your story and you will likely choose to be loyal to America. If you find yourself in the stories of your family then you will be loyal to your family. It is hard to be loyal to a family in which you are not included in the stories. It's hard to be loyal to a nation if you or your people are not included in the stories. It is hard to be loyal to anything if the story does not ring true for you, if you are not included, if you are left out.

This is what makes the story of God so awesome. The story of God is not limited to one people, that is, the people of Israel. From the beginning, when God called Abraham and promised to give him all those descendants, God said that he would bless Abraham so that he could be a blessing to all the nations. Last week we heard the story of God in which people from every tribe, every language, a countless multitude, is gathered around the throne proclaiming that salvation comes from God. We have a story that, if told right, is a story that includes everyone because God, through Jesus Christ, has done everything God can do to save everyone. The chains of slavery have been broken for everyone. The power of death has been defeated for everyone. Everlasting life in God's presence is offered to everyone. All are included. We tell the story of a God whose love and mercy is without limit, without boundaries. As Paul once wrote, Romans 5:8, God demonstrates God's love in this way; while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Not everyone has heard this story. And that number is increasing, certainly in the United States. Not everyone claims this story as their story. Not everyone finds this story to be true to their experience. The story of God is not a foundational story that everyone understands or

accepts. But it is our story. We have come to know the love of God through Jesus Christ. We have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit. There is something about the story of God that resonates with us. We have relationships with some saints who know this story and proclaim their loyalty to God. The story of God has enough truth in it so as we are able to say with Joshua, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

So what about your story? What is the foundational story that you can tell that motivates you to be loyal to God? If I was to tell my story to you, I would talk about my parents, of the church choir, of Howard and Dr. Thomas, of a retreat in the fall of 1983 and the fall of 1991. It is my relationships with these people and the experiences I had at those retreats that framed the choice I make to stay committed to God, to love and serve God. Who are the people and what are the experiences you have had that frames your choice to be loyal to God?

There's one last point I want to make. It is that choosing this day who you will serve does not have to be a one off decision. In fact, it shouldn't be. What good is it to say yes one time to God and then spend the rest of your life not being faithful to that choice? Maybe my experience is different from yours, but there have been times in my life where I had to renew my commitment to serve the Lord. There have been times of discouragement. There have been times when I have had to remind myself of what is at stake in my commitment to serving God. Thinking about my parents, thinking about the people that invested themselves into my life, thinking of the confidence the church has placed in me and the authority I have through my baptism, this all refocuses me, grounds me, gives my life renewed purpose. Perhaps there are times in your life when you need to retell your story to yourself so that you can recommit yourself to God. Maybe now is one of those times for you. My invitation for you is to take some time, maybe later this afternoon, and retell your God story. You don't have to tell another person unless you want to. Just telling it to yourself is fine. And then decide again, make your choice, whether or not you will serve the Lord. Then live out that choice. Choose to live the life of a saint who knows the story.

