

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

In Christian bookstores everywhere, you can find bookmarks or wall-hangings or other merchandise that bear excerpts from the passage we hear today from the Book of Joshua: “choose this day whom you will serve,” or “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Each of these phrases are lovely sentiments about our purpose as children of God, and both carry important reminders that we are here to serve the Lord, not the other way around. But if you look at these words within the context of the larger passage, you’ll see that there’s more here than nice words that have been proof-texted from the source.

The story of Joshua begins as Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness in the years of the Exile. Joshua was one of the twelve spies Moses sent to explore the land of Canaan, and he led the Israelites to conquer Canaan following the death of Moses. In today’s passage, Joshua is ready to lead them into the Promised Land. But there’s one more issue to deal with before that happens, so he gathers the leaders of the Israelites to Shechem and says to them, “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.” So there it is, this issue that’s keeping them from entering Canaan: the Lord wants their allegiance, their undivided loyalty, but they are clinging to the idols of their ancestors and the comfort and prosperity assured by their relationship with those gods who, they believe, have protected them through the years.

We are familiar with this ongoing allegiance the Israelites have to their past, and how many times they’ve made covenants with God, promising on their own part to be faithful to the one true God in their worship and devotion, pledging that throughout their lives they will follow God and only God. And then, before they get very far down the road, they’re right back where they started. We cannot criticize them, because we do the same thing in our lives. We are all human, they and us, and old habits die hard. We’ll almost always choose the comfort of what we know over the promise of what’s better, especially if it’s difficult to come by.

What’s happening between Jesus and those he’s teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum is not that different from what’s happening with Joshua and the Israelites at Shechem. “This teaching is difficult,” Jesus’s followers said; “who can accept it?” They have followed Jesus around the countryside, seen his miracles, watched him heal the sick, heard the promises of his teachings; but they cannot imagine eating his fleshing and drinking his blood, even if it does mean eternal life for them. In fact, they’re offended by the thought of it. And Jesus calls them on it: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe,” Jesus says to them. At those words, some did turn away, but the twelve stayed with Jesus *because* he promised them eternal life, and because they believed that he is the “Holy One of God.”

These covenants made by the Israelites to God and by the twelve disciples to Jesus are much like the covenants we make at our baptisms and reaffirm several times each year. When we renew our baptismal vows, we promise to repent and return to the Lord, to proclaim the Good News, to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Our promise is not only about believing and trusting, it’s also about doing and serving. We make these promises with every good intention, I believe, but sometimes it’s hard for us to know how to keep them, how to put our faith and belief into practice in an active way. And that’s why it’s critical to our practice of faith to remind ourselves frequently about what it means to live as followers of Christ—not just to be, but to live.

Those of you who read *Forward Day by Day* as I do have no doubt found it to be a simple but powerful tool for staying on track in your walk with Christ. One of my favorite resources from it is *A Morning Resolve*, which is found at the beginning of every edition. It says:

“I will try this day to live a simple, sincere and serene life, repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, impurity, and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity, and the habit of holy silence; exercising economy in expenditure, generosity in giving, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust, and a childlike faith in God.

“In particular I will try to be faithful in those habits of prayer, work, study, physical exercise, eating, and sleep which I believe the Holy Spirit has shown me to be right.

“And as I cannot in my own strength do this, nor even with a hope of success attempt it, I look to thee, O Lord God my Father, in Jesus my Savior, and ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*”

Speaking these words, either silently or aloud, is a contemporary way to take the advice given in today’s passage from the letter to the Ephesians. “Put on the whole armor of God;”...fasten the belt of truth around your waist, put on the breastplate of righteousness; put on your feet whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace; carry the shield of faith; take with you the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. These words were so literal for those who heard them read in their churches. How might we change them to make them literal for ourselves as well?

What if we think of truth when we fasten our skirts or our slacks, and righteousness when we pull on a shirt or button a blouse? Whatever covers the soles of our feet can become a prompt when we walk for us to speak of Christ’s love and peace. Purses and backpacks will be our shields of faith. Baseball hats or hair accessories become helmets of salvation, and our pens and pencils the swords of the Spirit. When we dress ourselves intentionally each day in the armor of God, we will know that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is guiding us, giving us strength, encouraging us in every step of the journey.

A story about a miser tells that he hid his gold at the foot of a tree in his garden. Every week he would dig it up and look at it for hours. One day, a thief dug up the gold and made off with it. When the miser next came to gaze upon his treasure, all he found was an empty hole. The man began to howl with grief, so his neighbors came running to find out what the trouble was. When they found out, one of them asked, “Did you use any of the gold?” “No,” said the miser. “I only looked at it every week.” “Well then,” said the neighbor, “for all the good the gold did you, you might as well come every week and gaze upon the hole.”

William Porcher DuBose, a gifted Anglican theologian from the early 20th century who taught at Sewanee said that “God in Christ is only half the truth and mystery of the incarnation. Christ in us is the full other half.” Every day, every week, we make choices about how we serve the Lord. My guess is that when we’re intentional, when we purposefully consider each day who we are and whose we are, we’re much better at being the full other half of Christ than we are when we give it no thought at all. The decision is ours, every day of our lives, to choose who we will serve. May we choose well, again and again, repeating Joshua’s words: “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Let us pray.

O God: Give us strength to live another day; Let us not turn coward before its difficulties or prove recreant to its duties; Let us not lose faith in other people; Keep us sweet and sound of heart, in spite of ingratitude, treachery, or meanness; Preserve us from minding little stings or giving them; Help us to keep our hearts clean, and to live so honestly and fearlessly that no outward failure can dishearten us or take away the joy of conscious integrity; Open wide the eyes of our souls that we may see good in all things; Grant us this day some new vision of your truth; Inspire us with the spirit of joy and gladness; and make us the cup of strength to suffering souls; in the name of the strong Deliverer, our only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*