

**Prayer of Illumination**

God of deliverance, you saved the people of Israel and chose Joshua to lead your people to the Promised Land. Choose us, and equip us to live with faith and peace. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

**Background:** We are traveling along with the Israelites who are figuring out what it truly means to be the people of God. God has brought them into the promised land of Canaan after crossing the river Jordan. Joshua, who follows Moses as the leader of God's people, is about to die. His farewell message is this, "God has saved you, now choose to follow God."

1. Recites all the ways God has cared for them already. As God has cared for you, you will now follow God and God alone.
2. God is holy. You can choose to follow lots of gods, the temptations are many, but I alone am holy and ask that you make a commitment. This is the telling of their covenant ceremony, their recommitment ceremony. It would be like renewing your vows or a pledge dedication Sunday :)

**Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**

24:1 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.

24:2 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.

24:3a Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

24:14 "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.

24:15 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 are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

24:16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods;

24:17 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;

24:18 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."

24:19 But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

24:20 If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good."

24:21 And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!"

24:22 Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses."

24:23 He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel."

24:24 The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey."

24:25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

At Shechem the whole people of God gather and commit together to serve the Lord as a response to all that God has done. The Psalmist on the other hand, gives us a way to worship and serve God in a personal way. Being a follower of Christ is both an act of the Covenant people of God and each individual person whose heart belongs to the Lord. Today following the sermon you will have an opportunity to respond to the Lord's goodness by making a pledge. If you have already sent a pledge in you may use the cards provided in the pews so you, too, might respond choose, re-commit to the work and worship of God.

### Psalm 138 Thanksgiving and Praise

<sup>1</sup> I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;  
before the gods I sing your praise;

<sup>2</sup> I bow down toward your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;  
for you have exalted your name and your word

above everything.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the day I called, you answered me,  
you increased my strength of soul.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>4</sup> All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,  
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

<sup>5</sup> They shall sing of the ways of the LORD,  
for great is the glory of the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly;  
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

<sup>7</sup> Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;  
you stretch out your hand,  
and your right hand delivers me.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

### **Proclamation of the Word**

Commitments, pledges, and, promises,...oh my! For some of us that sounds threatening like "Lions and Tigers and Bears, O my!" In the movie the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy and her friends were trying to make it to the great Oz, and the things they were afraid of include: Lions, tigers and bears. Some people seem to be afraid of commitments in the same way. Some of us do not want to make a commitment for various reasons. I crowd sourced and asked some others why they believe we do not make commitments. This is what we came up with:

1. I would have to make choices and give up other things.
2. Relationship- Fear of becoming overly attached to a person, the fear of losing that special someone.
3. Fear that I will not be able to do it, so I just don't make a commitment at all.
4. Laziness and sloth- just too much work or too hard.
5. Or let somebody else do it.

For the same reasons some are averse to making commitments, pledges, and promises. But for Christ followers, we by nature are promise makers. We belong to the covenant people of God. Baptism is one of our covenant ceremonies where we make promises to God and to one another to raise a child or support an adult in the faith journey. That is why you are asked to teach, take a turn serving in childcare, and support the church with your money, for instance. These are ways we fulfill the promises we make at each person's baptism.

Today's passage is the telling of one such covenant commitment ceremony. Notice these three takeaways.

- 1. Joshua assumes there are other gods, other than Yahweh, the Lord who has brought them out of slavery in the land of Egypt to this promised land of Canaan.**
- 2. We must gather and remember how God has saved us and been faithful. God chooses to care for us.**
- 3. Reflecting on God's faithfulness, we joyfully respond with service and commitment. We choose to serve God.**

Let's unpack those three things a bit.

**First, Joshua assumes there are other gods, and declares we must choose which god we serve.** They lived in a polytheistic world. The psalmist gives Yahweh praise this way.

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;

Now you may be thinking, we live in a monotheistic culture. When our children pledge allegiance to the flag five days a week, we say, "one nation under God." Our money has "In God we trust" stamped onto it. But we are not immune. Lots of things compete for our attention, time, loyalty, and even demand our love and adoration. Anything that distracts us from God and obeying and serving God becomes a little god in our own life. Things that demand our time away from loving God and neighbor can become gods.

Work and achievement can become a god. Pursuit of health can become our god. Friends, status, keeping up with the Joneses can become our god. Our addictions to substance or power or the internet can become our god. Our obsession with fear and anxiety, anything that has power over us can become a god.

God desires our whole heart. When Joshua asks for a commitment, he said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." The heart is not only the seat of our love and worship, it is the seat of our wills. It is a deliberate choice we have to worship and serve. The heart guides not just emotion, but actions.

To make commitment is to enjoy the relationship and journey of belonging to each other and to God.

**2. We must gather and remember how God has saved us and been faithful. God chooses to care for us.** Joshua recalls how God saved them from the bondage of slavery, was with them for forty years in the wilderness, and now has brought them into the Promised Land. We gather and remember our story of salvation as we study and worship together. We remember our story of salvation as we share life and faith together. I see this when small groups in the church care for one another, give witness to what God is doing, and when we serve others. Your small group might be the choir, women's circles, Bible Study, or serving on a Ministry team. SALT groups continue and new ones form so that we can be involved. Each member needs to be involved in smaller groups beyond worship so we can serve and minister together. We gather to remember what God has done and is doing because God's saving work continues. This week we opened our church home up to three families who need a home through Family Promise. Our classrooms became bedrooms, the hallway a family room. We were involved in God's saving work for these children and parents. The bonus for me was that I also served with another member of the church that I never see. We were able to catch up with each other, share about our kids, and work. Sharing life and naming where we need God's help and what God is doing in our lives. This is also how we gather and remember what God has done and will do.

**God chooses to covenant with us first.** God gives us a covenant community where we belong, grow, and serve together. The covenant promises of God continue as we gather as the church. One of the dangers I see today in our culture is some believe that the church is just one more consumer product they choose to serve their needs. I hear lots of folks who "church shop" as if they are looking for the restaurant that suits their every pleasure and hunger. But the church is a covenant community, the body of our Lord Jesus, who commits to gather together and serve God together. Sometimes that is wonderful, and sometimes that is hard work, like living in a family. Which leads us to the third move of the story of God's people and Joshua recommitting to the covenant.

### **3. Reflecting on God's faithfulness, we joyfully respond with service and commitment. We have a choice. We can choose and commit to God.**

Today is one of those days that you can come forward and express your commitment to serve the Lord. We belong to the covenant community, the people of God, and we each have a role to play. We pledge money to do mission and ministry together. Today your pledge card or commitment card is a way you and your house choose to follow the Lord. We signify our choice this way each year as we recommit to our responsibility as members of Christ's body.

**One of our Session Goals is that each person is Growing Spiritually.** The hard question we wrestled with is how we measure growth, especially spiritual growth. I believe that when we commit to practices of faith like financial stewardship, we cannot help but grow. God's spirit moves in us, but we do our part to grow. Spiritual practices will bear fruit for God's kingdom. One of the elders suggested that setting expectations for discipleship is the way we can help members grow spiritually as disciples. So, I picked up the our Presbyterian Book of Order, to remind us today of those expectations. If you are a list person, you may want to jot these down in the margin of the bulletin.

Notice that Joshua places before them the challenge to choose what/whom they would serve. And three times to people declare they will serve the Lord. Just as Joshua called for the people of God to examine their hearts, let's examine our hearts as we seek to grow as disciples. Let's do our checkup from the section called

#### *Book of Order G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members*

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,

- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.

I can put those up on our Facebook page for reference. These are the marks of faithful discipleship and practices which help us choose God and to serve God.

### **Salvation Army- Booth**

In just a few weeks we will be seeing red kettles and bell ringers from the Salvation Army as we shop. The Salvation Army serves the community in many ways. The Thrift store here in town, creates jobs for those working and raises money for ministries like the shelters in Anderson and Greenville. William Booth helped found the Salvation Army, which is structured like a military. William Booth was its first General. His goal was to help transform lives. While addressing misery in this world, he hoped to spread the good news in word and deed and to address misery in the next life. He was an evangelist who also served the human needs of others first. He wrote, "...in providing for the relief of temporal misery I reckon that I am only making it easy where it is now difficult, and possible where it is now all but impossible, for men and women to find their way to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." He like so many before us chose to commit their whole lives to Christ.

*The best way to discover the terms of the covenant for life is committing your whole life to Christ. God is ready to fulfill his covenant in and through you! We have a choice today. One of those is to be committed like one pious old gentleman...who would get up regularly at the church's prayer meeting and pray, "Use me, O Lord, use me - in some advisory capacity!" Or we can be like William Booth (who sounded a lot like General Joshua) who said, "I told the Lord that he could have all that there is of William Booth."*

**Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.**