

A Time for Choosing

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Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
October 16, 2022

Text: Joshua 24:1-15

There's a famous experiment called the Marshmallow Experiment. Maybe you've heard about it. A researcher sets a marshmallow in front of a small child. She tells the child, "I'm going to leave the room for a few minutes. You are free to eat the marshmallow if you want. But if the marshmallow is still here when I come back, you can have two marshmallows instead of one. If you eat the marshmallow, you don't get the second one."¹ And she leaves the room with the video cameras rolling. It's actually pretty funny watching the kids wrestle with this dilemma. Some of them push the marshmallow away. Some try to cover their eyes so they don't see it. But it's no use. Most kids up through about age five or six finally succumb and eat the marshmallow in front of them, rather than hold out hope for the second one. It's an experiment that shows that the ability to defer gratification for the sake of a greater future reward is something we have to develop—we're not born with it. But the fact that some people respond one way and others respond a different way to the same exact circumstances is a reminder that we human beings aren't just mindless robots. We make choices about our actions. How free those choices are is a matter for debate—I think the Marshmallow Experiment confirms a lot we already know about the long-term planning capacity of pre-schoolers. But we do make choices nonetheless, and because different people make different choices, the choices say more about what's going on inside of us than they do about the circumstances that bring us to the moment of decision.

Today's scripture is about a moment of decision. If you've been following along for the last few weeks, we've been hearing a story that began with God choosing Abraham and Sarah, offering to make a great nation of them. And the story of their family continued through captivity in Egypt, liberation at the sea, and the giving of the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah, God's Teaching about how they are to live. Now we've skipped forward in time. The first generation of Israelites that left Egypt, has died, including Moses. Because of their failure to trust and obey God, God swore that they would not enter the promised land, that the realization of God's promise would be given instead to their descendants. Now Joshua, Moses' successor, is leading the people.

God promised the land of Canaan to the Israelites, but there's a problem. The land of Canaan isn't empty. There are people already living there, and they're not too keen on having new neighbors. So the story of the book of Joshua is a story about conquest, as the Israelites, led by Joshua, take more and more of the territory promised to them with God's help, driving off and killing and enslaving the inhabitants. While I don't want to dwell on this today, I can hardly talk about the book of Joshua without mentioning that it's a hard story for us to hold onto, even as we insist that God loves the

¹ Description from recollection. Experiment is described in Wikipedia contributors. "Stanford marshmallow experiment." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 18 Aug. 2022. Web. 15 Oct. 2022.

whole world. And in more recent times, people have turned to the book of Joshua to justify acts of genocide—for example, the Puritans saw themselves as the Israelites, the New World as the land of Canaan, and the Native Americans as the Canaanites. It does help me a bit to know that archaeological digs have been unable to find any evidence of the events described in this book, suggesting that those who handed down these violent stories to us may have done so for reasons other than journalism and objective history. But let's just say that this is a story we have to hold in tension with the claim of the gospel, that God's covenant love is extended to all the people of the world in Jesus Christ.

So now we meet Joshua assembling the people as the time of conquest is winding down. The Israelites, for so many years a people wandering or at war, are getting ready to begin a more settled life. It's a time of transition. And so Joshua leads the people in a renewal of the covenant. It is time for this generation to claim the promises made to their ancestors, and to dedicate themselves to God. Joshua retells the story of the call and the gift of children to Abraham and Sarah, the captivity of the people in Egypt, God's rescue of them from slavery and protection of them through their escape and conquest of the promised land. The rewards that the people are about to enjoy do not come from their own efforts, but from the tireless liberating and blessing activity of their God: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored," God says, "and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant." What has happened to them is not their own doing. They are not in control. They are benefiting from God's grace, God's favor, which they do not deserve and can never earn.

And that might have been the end of the story. The Bible might have chosen to roll the credits, so to speak, at the point where God's promises have come true. The scriptures tell us a story about God's gracious activity, God's faithful love for a chosen people, and they might have left it there. God is awesome, trustworthy, powerful. What more is there to say? But after telling this whole story about what God has done for the Israelites, Joshua turns his attention to them: "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness." He urges them to put away the other gods whose memory and worship have lingered from the time of their ancestors till the present. And then Joshua puts his own choice out there, and challenges others to make theirs: "Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." After all that God has done, the story isn't over. The credits can't roll until we've seen how the people will respond. A good and generous God has set before them... a marshmallow of a promised land, but has also left them a Teaching about a way of life that will preserve and multiply the blessings they have received. Are these people going to wolf down the marshmallow, are they going to devour the blessing they've received, or are they going to serve God faithfully and sincerely, following God's precepts and living in God's ways, and see that blessing increase?

There's a spoiler alert here: the Israelites, the second and third generations who know about Egypt only from stories, make the choice to serve God. And the rest of the Old Testament is about how that commitment is tested and broken, and how God remains faithful to them nevertheless.

But the question hanging at the end of this text is for us as much as it is for them. Let's face it: we are blessed. We have blessings that we share in common with all those who are claimed by God in the waters of baptism. Our sins are forgiven through Jesus, and we're set free to love and serve God as God's beloved children. We have the promise of eternal life, "eternal" not just in duration but in quality—a life we live here and now in the light of God's eternity. But we also have blessings that not all Christians

have. We can worship and practice our faith without fear, as citizens of a free, prosperous, and powerful country. I've heard you name the particular blessings we have as a congregation: the quality of relationships between members of this community, the excitement and joy of the music we hear and participate in during worship, and the generosity with which people here respond to human needs in times of tragedy and disaster.

And you also have your own particular blessings. Maybe you are blessed with a spouse whose love and support allow you to be so much more than you would otherwise be. Maybe you have a passion for art or music or poetry and circumstances that give you the ability to pursue and feed that passion. Maybe you have a circle of friends that are there for you. Maybe you're just attuned to how precious each moment of life is. Whatever your circumstances, there is blessing to be found, and that blessing comes from God.

But that's not the end of the story. How are you going to live, as one who has been so blessed? I've seen the ways that so many of you respond, bringing a meal to someone who needs it, volunteering your time to build homes for needy families with Habitat for Humanity, taking the time to visit someone who's feeling alone, marching in support of justice and equality for all. It's not yet time for the credits to roll. Your story with God is not yet over. Your circumstances, blessings and everything else, aren't the final word. It's time to choose. How will you honor God with the blessings you've been given?

In the name of the one who has richly blessed all of us with the treasure of love and mercy in Jesus Christ. Amen.