

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
July 4, 2021
Abundant Colors
Joshua 24: 14-15

Reading

‘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. 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.’ 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. He 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 he is our God.’ 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. 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.’ 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 him.’ 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 him 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 all the people, ‘See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.’ So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

Message

The story about Joshua and the people of Israel is a about a critical decision and turning point in their history. Joshua has just given a recital of God’s saving actions in their history. Here is a summary of their actions. They are descendants of: Abraham who left his home to follow God, then lost patience and had a son with his wife’s maid; Jacob who cheated his brother to inherit the patriarchy and had twelve sons with two wives and two concubines; spoiled son Joseph sold into

slavery in Egypt by ten of his brothers who then came begging to live there because of famine; Moses saved from infanticide to stand up to Pharaoh and lead the people wandering in the desert for forty years, the same Moses who brought the tablets of law to the people who had started worshipping a golden calf, and who was exiled from the Promised Land because of his own temper, and Joshua who lead them as spy and general to take the “promised land” through war and killing.

In our reading, Joshua said he and his household would serve God and asked the people to decide: “who will you serve”? The moment was pregnant with remembrance and anticipation. Joshua reminded them God had done them good, but would do harm if they dealt falsely (again). There had broken many promises! They had come full circle to Shechem, where Abraham went when he first followed God, and Moses called them the people of God on the 40 year journey.¹ Shechem means shoulder/back; where we voluntarily carry our burdens, physical or metaphorical.”² Joshua asked three times- they willingly agreed to serve God.

Today is Independence Day for the United States of America. Many celebrate with picnics, family gatherings and fireworks. While it is a national holiday commemorating the declaration of a new nation, for most the day is not pregnant with remembrance and anticipation. It is just a day for fun. There are flags flying and many things are draped in the colors of the flag. It makes me

¹ <https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-significance-of-shechem/>, Dt 27:9, 12-13

² <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Shechem.html>

uncomfortable to see things decorated in imitation of the flag- shirts, flip flops, beer coolers, bathing suits, towels, table cloths, paper plates... It just seems disrespectful. I find it ironic these items are often found where there is also a sign saying, “America, love it or leave it,” or “These colors don’t run.”

This prompted me to think about colors and so I invited everyone to wear their favorite color today. An article about the meaning of colors, their power and symbolism says there is a psychology in colors. “They influence our thinking, inspire our decision-making, and impact our moods. From causing changes to changing reactions, colors are more powerful than we think.” But as expected, the article concludes that we make choices about color and how they impact us.³

One interpretation of the “red white and blue” is; red for hardiness and valor, white for purity and innocence, and blue for vigilance, perseverance and justice. These are positive interpretations. But “seeing red” can be angry and aggressive. Telling white lies is perpetuating seemingly “harmless” untruths. Blue can mean feeling depressed, passive or rigid. But colors are just symbols, as are words.

Like Joshua, our founders created an agreement. Our Declaration of Independence begins: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, all [humans] are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness... to secure these rights,

³ <https://www.color-meanings.com/>

Governments are instituted among [humans], deriving their just powers from consent of the governed... whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form... shall seem most likely to effect Safety and Happiness.

... Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes... [human]kind are more disposed to suffer... than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations... evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”⁴

It took eleven more years to write “ordinances;” the Constitution which begins with the values it is based upon. “We the People... in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”⁵ Two years later they began amending the document with the Bill of Rights to “prevent misconstruction or abuse of its powers.”⁶

⁴https://www.elcivics.com/us_declaration_preamble.html#:~:text=Preamble%20to%20the%20U.S.%20Declaration%20of%20Independence%2C%201776,are%20Life%2C%20Liberty%2C%20and%20the%20pursuit%20of%20Happiness.

⁵ <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/us#:~:text=The%20preamble%20sets%20the%20stage%20for%20the%20Constitution,does%20not%20define%20government%20powers%20or%20individual%20rights.>

⁶ <https://www.revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com/preamble-bill-of-rights.html#:~:text=The%20Preamble%20to%20the%20Bill%20of%20Rights%20The, voted%20on%20by%20Congress%20on%20September%2025%2C%201789.>

Joshua and the people reached a critical decision and turning point in their history, but we know they had to keep working at it. The prophets kept calling them back to their covenant; to examine how they were living it, not just in words, colors, flags, symbols and rituals but in actions and governance based on their values. It seems Independence Day it would be a good time for us to do this too.

Three stories came to me for today. The first is about videos Cedric shared with our Understanding through Sharing group. Some videos detailed atrocities committed against the indigenous people in our country and Canada; unconscionable abuse of individuals, tribes and treaty violations throughout history. They were hard to watch but necessary to see. But one was a story from today. A Tongva woman and little girl walked along the LA River talking about the plants. They engaged in the tradition of thanking the plants for their gifts and offering something in gratitude while harvesting; living in harmony with nature that provides all we need. If we open ourselves, this is a wonderful gift we could receive from their culture, an incredible blessing to change our way of thinking.

Two stories were in the media. The first was an announcement the NFL has said, "Football is gay." It followed the announcement by Carl Nassib, a white player, that he is gay. This is the same organization that destroyed the career of Colin Kaepernick, a black player in 2016 because he kneeled during the national

anthem in a peaceful protest of death by police brutality and racial inequality. He still remains unsigned by a professional football team.

Now, people in the activist community encourage us to celebrate every win against the structures and powers of oppression. We do not want to hold “oppression Olympics” over who suffers more. But that brings me to the second story. Gwen Berry, a black woman finished third in the hammer throw at the Olympic trials. The national anthem is only played once a day at the trials and it happened when she took the podium. Berry felt she was set up because of her past protests. She protested again, turning away and raising a t-shirt over her face that read Activist Athlete. In response a congressman called for her to be removed from the team. Berry said, “[it] is just proof people are so focused on patriotism they can’t focus on the root of why she and other athletes protest in the first place.”

When Press secretary Jen Psaki, was asked what the President would say. She responded, “... part of ...pride in our country means recognizing there are moments where we as a country, haven’t lived up to our highest ideals. And it means respecting the rights of people granted to them in the Constitution to peacefully protest.”⁷ Like the Israelites we come full circle to where we started without examining when we fail to live up to our ideals. When I miss-typed today’s date, it was ironic to note that the number 4 is the \$ sign on the keyboard.

⁷ <https://www.aol.com/gwen-berry-white-house-respond-231436285.html>

In my experience “these colors don’t run” means we face up to where we failed, learn, make amends and change; in our words, laws and actions, to celebrate the abundant colors of our people, as well as nature. Colors have no inherent “meaning.” We see them through the gift of the rods and cones in our retinas and they show us beauty in the world. Words are also just symbols until we make choices and take action on how they impact us. If we treat the colors of our flag and people as just colors, or the words of our founding documents or the Bible as just words, they don’t mean anything. We make choices about how they impact us.

My favorite color is the seven colors of the rainbow! Here is my new color psychology. Violet resonates in the gift of Simplicity. Indigo brings the experience of Peace. Blue centers Integrity in our soul. Green makes Community thrive. Yellow radiates Equality. Orange generates Stewardship. Red activates Service.

And here are fun things I have learned about colors. 1) Orange is for Halloween, a happy holiday of cute little ghosts, fun with Friends giving out candy, and beautifully carved pumpkins. 2) Never wear a red shirt on an away mission. 3) If you want to remember the rainbow colors think of the acronym is Roy B Giv. Or now, SPICES. Oh, 4) and it isn’t in the rainbow, but Quaker gray (the color of non-dyed- abuse free clothing) represents them all.