

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting,
November 8, 2020
Rev. Dr. Loletta Barrett
Stewards Serving with Wisdom
Joshua 24:1-3a & 14-25, Amos 5:18-24, Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16

Joshua 24:1-25

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. ²And 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. ³Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. ⁴“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. ⁵Now 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.” ⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ⁷for 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; ⁸and 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.” ⁹But 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. ¹⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ¹¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” ¹²Then 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.” ¹³He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ¹⁴The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” ¹⁵So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? ²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16

Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought.

Message

I went walking on Election Day filled with trepidation. The election, the prospect of unrest, and our country's future hung down over me like the cold, wet oppressive cloth of fog I walked through that morning. I realized no matter the results, there is a tough road ahead of us. But Spirit whispered, "Be still and know." In difficult times God is always present. The fog lifted.

Joshua spoke to his people at a difficult time. In God's voice he spoke a litany of their journey from Abraham, Isaac, Esau, Jacob, and Moses up to their present day. They had seen it all; as a small tribe oppressed by others because they turned away from their gods, through slavery, wandering in the wilderness, battles and curses. Yet God was with them.

The litany concludes with the present situation and an invitation: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built... you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant. 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.” Joshua chooses, “as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Do we not find ourselves in similar circumstances? No matter what we think we accomplished as individuals, as a meeting today or in the past, or as a country? We too have wandered, experienced slavery, battles and curses. We live on land we were “given,” which we did not labor for, in towns we did not build, and eat from fields we did not plant. A familiar song says, “We’ve come this far by faith,” but it is God’s faith not ours!

As a teen I got very confusing messages about faith and practice. My uncle and aunt hung a sign in their home that said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The message I heard at home was, “That’s showy. Jesus said go in the closet to pray. Who hangs signs to remind them?” Someday I will ask my uncle and aunt about it. They may like the reminder or it may be a witness to guests. I know it made me think. It affected how I viewed their actions and forty-five years later when I think of it I think about who I serve.

The prophet Amos called out people for faithlessness in the service they offered to God. They said they wanted the day of the Lord to come, yet Amos warned the preparations they made were attention getting noisy festivals, solemn prayers in the marketplace, and ostentatious offerings of wealth. Amos says these bring a dark and gloomy day without hope for God’s people. Real preparations

require offerings- of justice rolling down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream- that serve all of God's people.

In our stewardship time we are invited to think about serving through our gifts and financial resources. But it is even more important to consider who we serve and what service we offer. Is it God we serve? Are we preparing for the day of the Lord by building the kingdom, the kin-dom, the Beloved Community with justice and righteousness for all of God's children?

In our day Amos and Joshua would warn God does not care about worship, staff, money, personal possessions, houses or meetinghouses, if we are alone or in a family, have 600 members or 60. God does not care who is president of our country or about countries in general. These must not be "foreign gods," they are tools. We may all agree our country needs healing and one place to start is listening to the "other side." I agree. People need to be heard and appreciated. Listening and hearing other ideas, opinions, and honoring each other is very, very, important. But it too is a tool.

As people of faith, as Friends and as Christians we know there is something more essential. Jesus told us our first commandment was to love God- it is Joshua's question with different words, "Do you love God? Who will you serve?" Do we listen to and love God, first, foremost and before anything else? Do our lives demonstrate this? The second commandment is to love each other as we love

ourselves, including our enemies. In order to listen to others we must first love them. How do we do this?

When we listen and are open God provides a Guide in the wisdom/Spirit of God. “Easily discerned by those who love and seek her she brings perfect understanding. The vigilant... will soon be free from care... she meets them in every thought.” What God cares about is being in relationship with us, for us to listen and deeply love God. Then we can love and listen to others. Then we can celebrate God’s Light among us and build with justice and righteousness.

When Joshua made his challenge to the people to choose who they would serve, he had already made his choice, he already served God. He knew there were plenty of gods, cultural attractions/countries, and kings/presidents to distract the people. Like the sign my aunt and uncle posted, when Joshua publicly stated his choice he encouraged others to do so and then none of them could be wishy-washy.

The good news is like Joshua you and I and our meeting already serve God. And when we publicly state with our words and actions, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord,” we re-center ourselves in what is truly important and re-commit to doing it more and more deeply. It is the most important and central choice we make in our life and of the many choices we make each day. It is not easy, it is not popular and it does not conform to our culture. But you and I

are not alone. God is here always. Jesus taught us the Way. The Spirit is speaking and leading. We have each other.

This time and every time is turning point time. God's kin-dom and beloved community is already and not yet. It matters and it doesn't matter who wins elections. Our task is first to choose to love and serve God. Then empowered by the Spirit/wisdom we will love and listen with justice and righteousness.

As we begin our time of Open worship I offer this poem.

EMPTIED OF MYSELF Andre van Zijl

Emptied of myself
I am filled with You
O womb of joy
You invaded the citadel
of doubt and yearning
and with a single touch
erased all need.

I float buoyant upon
the dark waters of Your love,
fearless
before the insufficiency
of all perceivable things.