

2024 Proper 16B

The leaders of the people are gathered with the weight of history on their shoulders. The old guys who had led them for as long as anyone could remember had finished their work. It's time to look to the future, to someone will lead them into a new phase of their lives together. One who is ready to face the challenges ahead, of which there are many.

The last of the old guard stands and offers a word of wisdom. He recounts their history, the good and the bad. He warns them of the dangers of losing sight of who they are, but also of getting so stuck in the past that they fail to see who they might become. He finishes by telling them they need to make a choice. They need to decide whom they will serve, whom they will follow, how they want life in that land of promise and opportunity to be.

No, I'm not talking about the political conventions which occurred this summer. I'm talking about that reading from Joshua.

I will confess that until I sat down to write this sermon, I was thinking this event occurred soon after Joshua had taken on the mantle of leadership, when he was young a starry-eyed. I read it as a very "aspirational" moment, as my niece would call it.

But no, by now, the time of Moses is long past. All the people who had survived the wilderness sojourn were gone. It was a long time ago that Joshua led them across the Jordan River. A long time ago that the walls of Jericho had come a'tumblin' down. A long time ago that they had to sneak their spies into other people's settlements, to figure out how to conquer them. (We'll just gloss over the ugly side of claiming you've been promised ownership of a land which is already populated by other people...)

Now Joshua is feeling his age. He knows it's time for him to step back and let a new generation take on the job of leadership. But first he has something to say to them:

Don't forget the stories of where you were.

Don't forget that you were once slaves in Egypt.

Don't forget that you were given the opportunity to create a covenant with YHWH.

Don't forget that you blew it.

Don't forget how hard it is to be the people God has created you to be. It's far too easy to lose sight of who you are meant to be. It's far too easy to align ourselves with worldly power instead of putting our faith in God.

This story is laid out as a “once to every man and nation” moment. But in truth, it’s a call to keep coming back. A call to ask ourselves again and again who we are, what we value, whom we trust. How we want to be known in this world.

Whom will we serve?

Leap forward to Ephesians, and we are challenged to consider *how* we will serve.

I know this image of armor is troubling for many of us who strive to live according to the principles of non-violence. (And yes, sometimes we fail and have to repent and start again.) We would rather not use imagery of warfare to describe our lives in Christ.

But that is actually part of the point of this metaphor. The writer is subverting the all-too-familiar image of a Roman soldier to make his point.

The Christian is not being called to take up arms and beat others into submission. They are being called to choose the ‘armor’ of the kingdom of God: truth-telling, right-relationship, peace, faith, salvation, words of hope and love.

It may not always protect them from the Roman Empire, but it will distinguish them from it. There is an odd sort

of power that comes from choosing to serve Jesus instead of Caesar.

We choose, as a community of believers, to embody our faith in certain ways. Ways that are loving. That are willing to sacrifice our comfort to protect those in danger. To create a space where everyone can belong.

But we know that not everyone wants to belong. We Christians can be an odd bunch. (I was going to say weird—I really resent the way that word has become a political weapon!) Especially when passages like today's Gospel come up.

I am not going to spend a lot of time on parsing out the “body and blood” stuff here. Lauren did a fine job with it last week. If you missed that I invite you to find the recording of last week's service and watch it.

I want, instead, to look at what happens afterwards, and to ask, finally, *why* do we serve?

When the teachings of Jesus are too difficult or too provocative or unsettling, why do we stay?

A lot of people don't. In that passage today, we hear that many left. For some, he bumps up against blasphemy. For others, he's too esoteric. They are

physically hungry and he's blathering on about spiritual bread. So they make their choice. And it's not Jesus.

I have to give them a little credit. At least they are honest and direct. They don't pretend to be something they aren't.

It still hurts when they walk away, though. When Jesus asks those who remain, "Do you also wish to go away?" I always hear it saturated with pain and doubt and sadness. But I also hear him giving them a choice. Asking them to make a decision about who they want to be.

I take a certain delight in Peter's answer. There is an aspect of it that seems very practical. As if he has considered leaving...but decided that there was nowhere else to go. Jesus has something the rest of them don't. The words of eternal life.

Peter chooses those. The uncomfortable, disturbing, unsettling inconvenient words of eternal life.

He'll stick with the guy who makes a difference in people's lives, even if he does go off on some really bizarre tangents once in a while.

He'll stick with Jesus.

We are in the last couple of months of what has been a very long, already very ugly political season. It's probably only going to get worse from here. By now you know me well enough that I am never going to stand in this pulpit and tell you the name of the person you should vote for. Even if I want to. Even if you want me to. Even if it's blatantly obvious how I feel about the choices.

But I will ask you to make a choice. And I will urge you to vote in November. To participate in our common life as citizens of this country, even though our ultimate citizenship is in the kingdom of God. We have a responsibility to ourselves, to each other, to the generations that come after us, to make a choice and act on it.

In the meantime, I will continue to preach the Good News. And sometimes that can sound pretty political.

Presiding Bishop Curry has been quoted as saying: "the principle on which Christians must vote is the principle: "Does this look like love of neighbor?" "

It's good advice. It's the standard to which we should hold ourselves every day. In every situation. Whenever we find ourselves presented with a difficult but important choice.

So in the days and weeks and months between now and November 5, I will keep reminding you to be especially mindful and intentional about reflecting the values laid out for us in our baptismal covenant. Every day. In every interaction with others—especially those who disagree with you. Remember to respect the dignity of every human being, even as you strive for justice and peace among all people. Remember that we get through this together, forgiving ourselves and one another when we make mistakes. Remember to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.

And then continue that practice on November 6 and every day thereafter. Make the choice. Who do you serve? Who do you follow?