

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
We Will Serve the Lord
Joshua 24:1 – 2a, 14 – 18

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Two months ago, my husband was ordained and installed as a Presbyterian pastor. (Needless to say, my efforts to convince him to become Lutheran proved futile.) A dear friend and mentor gave the sermon that day. With decades in the trenches as a pastor, his encouragements were *anything* but hollow. He shared a story that I think you will really appreciate. (pause)

Young and ambitious, Rick was ready to *change the world* in his first call. (pause) He had gotten together with an older couple in the congregation, (pause) and they broke the news that their church was *not* Rick's church.

"This is *our* church, you know?" Rick immediately felt nervous. Had he accepted an impossible call, with controlling members who felt that they *owned* the church?

"We have been here for *years*. We were founding members, and we will continue to be here, even after you're gone. You will move on to another call, but we will still be here, and so will the church. This is *not* your church. This is *our* church. (pause) And in truth, this is not our church either. This is Jesus' church. This is *Jesus'* church first. Then it's *our* church. And lastly, it's also *your* church."

As Rick shared this story, he told us that the old couple was right. Rick *did* move on from that church, but the couple remained. They remained, and generations after them were raised up in the church. One day, the couple would die, and it would be true that the church was

ultimately not the couple's church either. The church, in all times and in all places, is *Jesus'* church. (pause)

We *need* the constant reminder that the church *is Jesus'*, because we're prone to forget. We often mistakenly associate the church with her pastors and leaders because (let's face it), pastors and leaders shape and guide the church. We might say that this church was Gordy's and Dan's and now it's Jim's, or that *that* church is Bob's, and *that* church is John's, and *that* church is Carol's. And pastors and leaders may say, "These are my people. Or these are my youth. Or these are my disciples." But the truth is, though pastors and leaders are called to the church for a time, no person owns the church. The church is not *any person's*. The church *is Jesus'*.

We need these reminders from time to time, when the waters are calm *and* when they're unsteady. (pause) We need these reminders when the waters are calm, because we're prone to glorify our leaders and follow them instead of Jesus. We need these reminders when the waters are unsteady, because the temptation is to base our commitment on how we perceive our needs and wants are being met. (pause)

In Joshua 24, the waters were calm. (pause) Israel had entered the Promised Land and God had defeated their enemies. The land was theirs, and they settled in. Joshua was nearing the end of his life, and there would be no leader like him or like Moses to guide them into the next season. The people would be tempted to fall away, to believe that they no longer needed God, and to misbelieve how they got to this wonderful land. Joshua knew that he could not control this people, but made a move that would establish his legacy.

He gathered all the people of Israel together at Shechem. Shechem was a significant place. It was the place God had promised to give to Abraham's descendants in Genesis 12.

Standing on that hallowed ground, the people remembered and recognized the fulfillment of that promise. It was in Shechem that their forefather, Jacob, buried his household's idols in Genesis 35. Jacob commanded his household to put away their gods, and then he buried them. In Joshua 24, Joshua too calls for the people to throw away their gods, and to yield their hearts to God *alone*.

Shechem is a place of God's promise and fulfillment. It's therefore the perfect place to recognize what God has done and to declare fealty to God *alone*.

In Joshua 24, we find this powerful verse, calling for fealty. We find it today on plaques in homes, and commonly recited by heads of households: "Choose this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Jos 24:15). This is a *powerful* verse, and understandably a favorite. But what we *don't* as commonly hear, are the verses immediately before and after this verse. It's fascinating that the verses before and after aren't as familiar, because these verses are in fact the *most powerful* verses.

In verses 2 – 13, Joshua recounts for Israel what God has done for them. He reminds them that God chose Abraham, though he served other gods. God brought Abraham "from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants" (Jos 24:3). They became enslaved in Egypt, and God brought them out of slavery and destroyed their enemies. God brought them through a long time in the desert and gave their enemies into their hands. God destroyed their enemies and Israel took possession of the land. Theirs was a story of victory in many times and places – not because of their own might, but because *God* had fought for them. And Joshua's recounting ends in verse 13: The LORD says, "I gave you

land you had not worked on, and I gave you towns you did not build – the towns where you are now living. I gave you vineyards and olive groves for food, though you did not plant them.’”

Israel had been chosen, blessed, and given victory – not because of their worthiness or through their own power or because of *any other* god, but because the one true God was faithful to His promise. Whom would they serve – the God who had chosen and saved them, or some other god?

At this point, whom could they *possibly* choose other than the God who had chosen them? They *boldly* declare that they *too* will serve the LORD, because He is their God (Jos 24:18).

Joshua offers a *most surprising* response. He doesn't thank them for their oath of fidelity or breathe a sigh of relief, convinced that he has led them well. He instead *argues* with them; they are *not able* to serve the LORD! The LORD is a holy and jealous God. He does not share His people with any other god. But the people are determined; they *want* to commit. With Joshua leading them, they likely felt confident that if he could follow through on his commitment, they could follow suit! But what about *after* Joshua dies? And what will happen when all who knew him, dies? (pause)

It is often unsettling and fear-inducing when a leader leaves. The leaving brings with it a whole host of questions: Will I have a similar relationship with the new leader? Will the influence I once had shift? Will decisions be unfavorable and people leave? What kind of domino effect will take place? We hope the effect will be positive!

In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers wrote a devotion on the “‘passing of the hero.’” He wrote, “Our soul’s history is frequently the history of the ‘passing of the hero.’”

Over and over again God has to remove our friends in order to bring Himself in their place, and that is where we faint and fail and get discouraged. Take it personally: In the year that the one who stood to me for all that God was, died [or left] – I gave up everything? I became ill? I became disheartened? Or – I saw the Lord? ... It must be God first, God second, and God third, until the life is faced steadily with God and no one else is of any account whatever. ‘In all the world there is none but thee, my God, there is none but thee.’”¹

This is a true challenge! Mentors, pastors, and leaders are *hugely* important in our lives of faith. I can’t imagine where I would be without certain role models in *my* life. But our role models are not God! (pause)

As Joshua gathered the people together, there were a number of things he *didn’t* do. He *didn’t* recount the wonderful deeds that he had accomplished as their leader. He *didn’t* challenge them to be like him. He *didn’t* plead with them to make his legacy honest. He didn’t do any of that.

Instead, he maintained the focus where it was supposed to be. He recounted how God had chosen them, saved them, and blessed them. They were gathered together at Shechem because of God’s *unmerited* goodness and faithfulness to them. One question remained: Whom would they serve? (pause)

59 years ago, a little church named St. Timothy’s was birthed. What was once a small group gathering at a riding club became a growing congregation breaking ground on Camden Avenue. The congregation continued to grow, and so did the ministry of St. Timothy’s.

¹ <https://utmost.org/classic/the-price-of-vision-classic/>

Throughout these 59 years, various pastors and leaders have shepherded this congregation, most notably of course, Gordon and Dan Selbo, for a combined 45 years! Their love and commitment to this church truly was a gift! Many of you were attracted to St. Timothy's *because* of Gordy and Dan – and I've got to tell you – I was one of them!

With how long they served and the significance their leadership *continues* to mean for St. Timothy's, it's tempting to believe that Gordy and Dan were the ones who sustained this church – and that without them, this church will fall apart. (pause) But a church built on a person is *not* a church. The church is the *body of Christ*, forgiven and given purpose by the blood of Jesus, brought together and sustained by the Holy Spirit! It was the *Holy Spirit* who gathered that small group together and caused it to grow. It was the *Holy Spirit* who sustained you through shifts in pastoral leadership. It was the *Holy Spirit* who opened your heart to faith and upheld you when you had crises of faith. It was the *Holy Spirit* who provided for you when the economy took nose dives during the DOT COM crisis and the Great Recession. It was the *Holy Spirit* who carried you during denominational shifts. It was the *Holy Spirit* who blessed you with new life and new families into this congregation. And is the *Holy Spirit* who will bring us through this season and bring about God's good purposes that you and I cannot yet see.

(pause)

God is so good! I invite you to stand, and when you are ready, to sing this traditional African song with me.

1 God is so good,
God is so good,
God is so good,
he's so good to me.

2 He cares for me,
He cares for me,
He cares for me,
he's so good to me.

3 God answers prayer,
God answers prayer,
God answers prayer,
he's so good to me.

4 I praise his name,
I praise his name,
I praise his name,
he's so good to me.²

We will serve the Lord! Amen!

² https://hymnary.org/text/god_is_so_good_god_is_so_good#Author