

August 27, 2023 Lynda Waters Sermon. You Choose

Joshua 24:14-15 NRSV

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.'

Matthew 16:13-18

¹⁶ ¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Begin:

There's a Car Commercial on TV that connected with me. I'm not going to buy their car, but I like the commercial.

A little girl asks: Daddy, how big is the ocean? But Daddy doesn't answer her. Instead, he tells his (likely) business call he'll call them back later, loads her up in the car and they drive to the ocean. Tagline rolls up: Life is defined by the choices we make. Define yours.

I always asked my daddy questions like that. Daddy loved answering questions ... he was always good for another 15 minutes or so at bedtime if I picked a complicated one. Like "Why do boats float?" ... and off he went on Archimedes' principle of water displacement ... totally missing the REAL answer to why boats float ... which was "Because they're in the water!"

Daddy was also a "dyed in the Tartan" Scots Presbyterian. A bit of a Bible scholar. He studied Greek in graduate school so he could read the New Testament in its original language.

I remember watching JFK's funeral on TV with my parents, and my good friend Joann. We were in junior high school at Wilson. (well, that dates me, and Harriet!) And every 5 minutes, one of us would ask a question about what was happening. Daddy had pulled a stack of reference books that were 3 feet high ... because here was a young Presbyterian girl, a young Jewish girl, his Southern Baptist wife (now of course, a Presbyterian), and someone who could probably quote an awful lot of John Calvin's teaching ... answering questions about a Catholic funeral.

So yeah, you could say I grew up in a household that had chosen to serve the Lord.

As Kim read in Joshua 24, this was the choice that Joshua put to all the tribes of Israel, once they were in the Promised Land. "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your ancestors, or the gods of the Amorites where you are now living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

The people had to decide ... they had to CHOOSE ... whether they would obey the Lord, who had already proven his trustworthiness, or not.

And just in case they had forgotten about God's trustworthiness, Joshua first reminded them of what the Lord had said: I took your father Abraham and gave him many descendants; I have brought you out of the house of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down. I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."

We learn later in the book of Isaiah, Thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.

OR they could worship the local gods who were only man-made idols. Really, who would want to do THAT?

Well, It's easy to slip into going about life in your own way. But there comes a time when you have to CHOOSE who or what really matters. And once you have chosen to serve God ... or to be ruled by God's spirit ... it's probably a good idea to reaffirm that choice every day, because we kinda like to "do it my way."

Why renew that desire to serve God every day? Why try to weave it into your daily habits? Into family traditions? Because, as Paul says in his letter to the church in Rome:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do ... I do not do. But what I hate, I do. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do, is not the good I want to do; ... no, the evil I do not want to do – THIS I keep on doing!

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So, let's move from God the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Old Testament ... to Jesus (God the Son), in the New Testament.

We listened to Matthew 16:13-18.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

Why in Caesarea Philippi? And why did Jesus refer to himself as the Son of Man? (see, I told you I like asking questions!)

Caesarea Philippi was a mixed pagan city of Greeks, Romans and Jews, at the foot of Mount Hermon. At the base of the mountain was a temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus, who was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. The Romans considered both of those men to be gods. Now these two men are dead.

So, that's the setting.

Why did Jesus call himself the Son of Man? He wanted to show that he was an ordinary person. He used that term for himself a lot. It is the term used in the prophesy of Daniel to describe a figure with authority from God. Many people connected this prophesy with the idea of the coming Messiah.

¹⁴ And to Jesus' question, the disciples said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, ... and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

When I read this, I see how totally "Man" Jesus is (and how totally "God" Jesus is ... exploding head) ... because this is after his disciples have seen Him quote Jewish law, teach in parables, feed multitudes, calm the seas, heal people, forgive people (ooh, the

Scribes and Pharisees REALLY didn't like that!) and they STILL haven't connected the dots! But Jesus is patient and asks, 'But who do you say that I am?'

¹⁶ Simon Peter answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son (not the adopted son) of the living (not the dead) God. Peter made the most powerful statement of contrast possible!

¹⁷ Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.

Remember, they are standing near the temple where people sought the will of the gods by flesh and blood sacrifices. Jesus teaches that God the Holy Spirit confirms the truth. People CHOOSE what they believe, and the Holy Spirit guides them.

I believe THIS is when Peter's faith becomes real. (Not that he didn't continue to struggle ... the anger in the Garden of Gethsemane, the denials in the courtyard of the high priest).

BUT Peter was the one at Pentecost who said: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.

Last week, Brian Malek talked about when people's faith became real to them. Some by witnessing miracles, some by inspired teaching ... and likely many people because of how Jesus saw them as individual people and cared about THEM.

So, big question: **When did MY faith become real?**

Short answer: When Charlene died.

Long explanation ...

When Harriet Lenfestey and I were in first grade at Gorrie, one of our classmates, and Sunday School friends, was Charlene Latimer. Charlene and I were friends outside of school too, because we both lived on Davis Islands. Well, Charlene died from her bathrobe catching fire from an electric log fireplace. It was horrible.

What was even more severely traumatic to our parents, was that two other children in this congregation died that same year. As my mother recalled years later, it rocked this church to its core. I don't remember if Charlene's parents were even members here; we might have just picked Charlene up on the way to church. But the parents of the other child and teen remained some of the most faithful worshipers and participants in the life of this church.

Their presence, some 65 years later, lives on at HPPC. You'll find Mrs. Belt's chocolate birthday cake recipe on Harriet's Florida Kitchen website. Mr. Belt was a contractor and a major participant in the building of Cedarkirk, our Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center. The little girl's big brother was the reason I went to Georgia ... we were both very active in our Youth Group; you'll find Susan Watrous' name on the silver Communion Service pieces. Those families remained fully active, witnesses, among others, that God did not desert them; and they did not stop serving Him.

So very early on, I knew that bad things happen to good people. And those good people had a faith that was REAL. Things happened that there is NO WAY that we can understand. And certainly not all at once when I was 6 years old.

But as I learned things in my head, and observed what people in my church did, and what I experienced at home, my faith grew. And, the Holy Spirit worked on me without my ever knowing it. "Flesh and blood cannot reveal this to us."

My Jewish friends had a mezuzah on their doorway.

The Mezuzah scroll contains two paragraphs from the Torah.
(Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21).

"Hear O Israel: The Lord our G-d, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your heart.

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as reminders on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, speaking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

Powerful words to live by.

So, what did Choosing the Lord mean in our house as we raised Becky and Stacey? Well, we promised to raise our children that way when our children were baptized here. But the Waters didn't post a mezuzah on our doorway. I'm not sure how much we even actively thought about purposefully showing it.

My favorite Bible verse is Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.

I always said I should print that and sit it on top of the TV (Televisions had tops, back then). We did monitor what our kids watched, though. Nickelodeon went out the window with the show "Don't get mad, get even." Shows like Roseanne, The Simpsons and any show that the kids were disrespectful to adults, were off the table. (They didn't need encouragement!)

One night, as Chip was out of town on business, the girls and I were eating dinner at the coffee table, watching a show none of us had ever seen. It was about a single Dad and his 14-year old daughter ... the he was LYING to her about his dating relationship. The commercial comes on, and one of the girls said "I bet we never get to see this show again." And the other one said "Bet we're not even gonna see the end of this one!" And, you guessed it, they were both right!

The apostle John warns us in Revelation, in the passage he wrote to the church at Laodicea. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

Seems pretty clear that God wants us to choose.

Practically speaking, choosing and sticking with my choices actually was a big help as we raised our family.

James Chapter 5 tells us ... and honestly, I always thought this was a Presbyterian thing, because I'm fairly certain I heard it a lot as I grew up ... but it's straight from the Bible!

Let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgement.

In the Gospel according to Lynda: So that you don't argue with your kids in the grocery store after a long day at work ... Seriously, how many choices had I made at work and at the store already!

If either of them were here today, I'm sure they could shout out my response to their second request for some candy in that checkout line:

"What part of NO did you not understand?"

Sometimes that phrase was preceded by "I'm sorry. What part of NO did you not understand? ... but more often by a really drawn out "Excuuuuse me? What part..."

A corollary to that, maybe for a discussion another day, was "Never say NO if you can possibly say YES. Really, was it any harder for them to have a friend spend the night, than not? But it was amazing how quickly that "NO" could pop out of my mouth. And once it was out, it was out. There was no going back.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew Chapter 5) ... You know, Blessed are the ... all those kinds of people that "this world" doesn't put up very high on the Ladder of Success: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the gentle, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (you'll never hear that in a job interview) ... the merciful, the pure in heart (nope, not on a resume), the peacemakers, those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

Then Jesus says: Blessed are YOU when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you FALSELY, on account of Me.

"Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great."

We are called to be different; and our ultimate home is Heaven.

Jesus goes on to tell us: you are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has become tasteless, it is good for nothing. (Kinda like being "lukewarm") You are the light of the world; you do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a lampstand, and it gives LIGHT to ALL IN THE HOUSE. ... Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

HPPC's new mission statement is to be the Light and Love of Christ IN ACTION, FOR our community.

But truly, that community starts in our homes ... in your household.

Why reaffirm your choice to serve the Lord every day?

Why try to weave it into the daily habits, blessings before meals, prayers before bed?
Into family traditions: lighting an advent wreath, reading the story of Jesus' birth from Luke on Christmas eve?

Why? Because we need to be reminded; because we are like Paul and do ... not what we truly desire in our hearts, but what WE want to do in that moment. ... because we are called to be different from this world.

In Isaiah we read: Thus says the LORD, who created you: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.

God has called every one of us by name, and through his precious only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, he has REDEEMED us ... because He loved us, and we are HIS.

Please pray with me.

Almighty God, who created us, who loves us, who redeems us. Bless each house represented here, that we may bring glory to you and shine the light and love of Christ throughout our community. We thank you that we belong to you. In your son's name we pray, Amen.

Please stand and sing our final song, Hymn 420: God of Grace and God of Glory.

Benediction

And now, go forth into your community in peace,
Choosing to love and serve the Lord.

And the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Remain with you now, throughout this week, and always.

Don't forget Sunday School, right through this door!

Scripture references:

Joshua 24:14-15 NRSV

Matthew 16:13-18

Romans 7:15-19, 24-25

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21

Revelation 3:15-16

James 5:12

Matthew 5:3-16

Isaiah 43:1

Lynda Frieze Waters was baptized and grew up at Hyde Park Presbyterian Church. She went to Gorrie, Wilson and Plant then headed to Athens to become a Georgia Bulldog. She graduated with a degree Journalism/Advertising, and met her husband Chip. They married in 1972 at HPPC and she worked most of her career at TradeWinds Beach Resort as eventual Vice President of Marketing. Before daughters Becky and Stacey arrived, Lynda and Chip served as youth advisors, and had a pet octopus. Lynda has served several terms on the Session and on numerous committees. She and Chip enjoyed many years of boating, salt water fishing, and generally enjoying outdoor adventures. They now live a more subdued life next door to Stacey, Josh, Carter Claire and Margot Crum.