



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

**As for Me and My Household, We Will Serve the Lord**  
**The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, November 8, 2020**  
**The Rev. Paul McLain**

'But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'  
In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In our Old Testament lesson from Joshua, the Hebrews had at long last won their many wars against the Caananites, to fully occupy the Promised Land. They had begun the transition from being a wandering and warlike people to become a settled, agricultural people of the land. Their great general Joshua had divided up the land so that each tribe received its own parcel. Each tribe was sent away to be planted and to plant in its new homeland. While they had achieved their dream of peace and prosperity, they had lost two things along the way.

First, they had lost their total dependence upon and their need for God. Many of the tribes drifted toward the agricultural false gods of the conquered people in their homelands. They were looking for gods that would give their new lands fertility and bountiful crops, rather than seeking the one true God to serve and glorify.

Second, they had lost their sense of national purpose and unity. Their long period of wandering in the desert and their many years of fighting for the Promised Land had united them around a shared journey and a common goal. Now, their identities were wrapped up inside each of their own tribes in their scattered homelands. Joshua saw these changes in the people all too clearly.

He still knew that God had chosen the people of Israel. But now he wondered, had the people of Israel *chosen* God? Or, more fundamentally, was there even such a thing as the people of Israel anymore? Joshua knew he was near the end of his life and he had to do something. So, he called a gathering of all the tribes at Shechem.

Shechem is important, not only because it was the closest thing they had to a national capital, but because it was the place where God first gave the promise of the land to Abraham, and Abraham's response was to build an altar to God there. And there was a mountain at Shechem from which Abraham could look out on the horizon and envision virtually the entire Promised Land.

Joshua began what would become his farewell speech by reminding the people of Israel of their shared story. He hearkened them back to Abraham's family. Abraham's father, brother, and Abraham himself started out in a far-off land by serving false gods. Yet, the one true God still chose Abraham to be the father of a new people. Joshua reminded them of Abraham's years of wandering, the slavery of the

people in Egypt, their deliverance through the Red Sea, their years of wandering in the desert, their victories in battle over the Caananites, and now, at long last, their possession of the land of milk and honey. He reminded them of how God was with them and guided them each step of the way.

Joshua said that it was now time for the people to make a choice.

Will they choose the false gods still worshiped in their lands, or will they choose to serve the one true God who has been present with them throughout their journey? And, he leads by example with a clear and unequivocal answer of where he stands by declaring, 'As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'

In a few moments, we will ask Brie and Barbara, the parents, along with the godparents, to make a conscious choice for Beckett, who we will baptize today. Just as Joshua asked the people of his day, we will ask them if they renounce that which separates us from the one true God. We will then ask them if they turn to God's Son, Jesus, and put their whole trust and place their faithful obedience in his grace and love.

Their answers will define Beckett's identity, just as the answers of the people of Joshua's time defined the identity of their children and their children's children. They and we make the conscious choice to be children of God. After that, we will all do something very important. We will all stand and renew our baptismal covenant.

Essentially, that's what happened at the end of Joshua's farewell address. Joshua asked the people to recite the story of God's deliverance. He asked them to publicly announce their choice of the God they will serve.

It was important that they and we do this as a community. God, through Joshua, was knitting back together this one people as a unified nation devoted to serving God. We are also knit together today as one family of God, welcoming Beckett into our shared story and identity as beloved children of God.

Those words 'knit together' are very important. The original meaning of the word covenant was to rebind together two torn pieces of cloth. Covenant was and is God's means of rebinding the people to God. Through it, we are also rebound to one another.

Covenant also inherently means there are separations and divisions that need to be knit back together. We can see this in our personal and communal journeys, especially when we try to move forward without God. We can see this in our national life, where we as the Church are called to be the voice of unity, civility, service, understanding, healing, hope, peace, and love.

Just after Joshua leads the people in renewing their covenant with God, he wrote down their words in the book of the law. Then, as an old man, he rolled a large stone up under the oak tree where they were all gathered.

He told them that the stone shall be their witness, for it heard all the words given by God as well as the promises made by God's people. That stone was their sign of hope in carrying forward their identity with unity and devotion to God from generation to generation. Today, Beckett is our sign of hope.

As we all make promises to support him and to share with him in Christ's eternal priesthood, he is bound forever in our shared story. He is knit together with us in making this holy covenant, 'As for us and our households, we will serve the Lord.' *Amen.*