

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

The **Scripture** readings for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost are **special**, and they deserve to be **remembered**. Each one of our readings for today speaks about **rededication** - rededication to our **marriages**, to our study of **God's Word**, and most important of all, to the **LORD Himself**. Our sermon today takes us to a place called **Shechem**, where Joshua told the Israelites about the loving and powerful deeds which God had performed on their behalf. In response, they **rededicated** themselves to God by saying, "***We Will Serve The LORD.***"

Our text takes place very close to the **end** of Joshua's life. He is 110 years old. Most people today don't live that long, but even as they get to be 80 or 90 years old, many start to think, "What am I **doing** here? Why am I still **alive**? I want to go **home** and be with **Jesus!**" I think we need to remember that as long as the LORD allows us to live on this earth, He still has **work** for us to do, and Joshua was no exception. The events of our text mark the **final** opportunity for Joshua to address **all** the Israelites in a **formal** gathering at **Shechem**.

Our text begins, "*Then Joshua gathered **all** the tribes of Israel at **Shechem**, and he summoned the elders of Israel, its heads, its judges, and its officers, and they presented themselves **before God.***" Shechem is a Hebrew word which means **shoulder**. It is a well-named city, because it is located on the **shoulder** of two mountains - Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal - about 35 miles **north** of Jerusalem. Locating this event at Shechem was a **natural** choice, because the **valley** between the two mountains provided an excellent **arena** for a large gathering of people. It was **also** a natural choice because it happened to be where Joshua **was** at the time, and at the age of 110, he probably didn't care to do a lot of **traveling** any more.

Shechem was also a very **historic** location. It was there that God had promised Abraham, "*I will **give** this land to your descendants.*" It was there that Abraham built his first **altar** to **worship** the LORD. But most important of all, it was there that Joshua had called the Israelites together shortly after they had **entered** the Promised Land, in order to **renew a covenant** with the LORD. For those who had been present, no doubt the **memories** came flooding back - the **blessings** which God had promised them if they remained **faithful** to Him, and the **curse**s which He had promised if they **rebelled** against Him.

Now **once again**, Joshua had gathered the people to renew their **covenant** with the LORD - in the **presence** of the LORD. Although it is not specifically mentioned, it is very likely that the ark of the covenant had been brought from the

tabernacle in **Shiloh**, about 12 miles away. It is even possible that the **entire tabernacle** had actually been moved to Shechem for this solemn occasion. At any rate, there in the presence of God, Joshua began his address to the people by saying, *“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, has **said**.”*

Joshua, who had long served the Israelites as their **political** and **military** leader, now served them also as a **prophet**. The words which he spoke to them were not **his** words, but rather, they were **God’s** words. Joshua was simply serving as a **mouthpiece** for the LORD. Interestingly enough, what he had to say was not **new** to the people - it was a **history** lesson. Joshua reviewed the events of their history which focused on displays of God’s **love** and **power** on behalf of the Israelites. He began with **Terah**, Abraham’s father, and how the LORD took Abraham **out** of an environment where **idols** were worshiped. He then went on to tell how God had blessed Abraham with **Isaac**, and how He had blessed Isaac with **Jacob and Esau**. Of course one of the events with which they were all familiar was how the LORD had led them out of **Egypt** by opening a path through the Red Sea, and destroying the pursuing Egyptian army. And finally, Joshua reminded them of some **current** events - how the LORD had led them **into** the Promised Land, and had given them **victory** over their enemies, **cities** they had not built, and **food** they had not grown. The obvious purpose behind this history lesson was to make the people **realize** how richly they had been **blessed** by the LORD.

The blessings of **faith**, **family**, **freedom**, and a **future** are not unique to the **Israelites** either. **We** have them as well. The problem is that it is rather easy to **forget** about how **wonderful** these blessings are - until they are in danger of being **lost**. For example, when your **faith** is shaken by the death of a loved one, or your **family** is rattled by stress and strife - when your **freedom** is threatened by tyrants and terrorists, or your **future** is in question because of the loss of your job - suddenly the enormous **value** of these blessings is seen **clearly**. But why does it usually take some kind of impending **doom**, before we open our eyes to see the **riches** which the LORD had bestowed on us? Thank the LORD that **whatever** it takes, He sees to it that we **do** recognize our blessings, and that we have the opportunity to **respond**.

After considering all the great things which the LORD had done for the Israelites, Joshua asked the people to do two things - **fear** the LORD, and **serve** the LORD. He said, *“Now, therefore, **fear** the LORD and **serve** him wholeheartedly and faithfully. Remove the gods that your fathers served in the region across the River and in Egypt, and serve the **LORD**.”* Ordinarily when we think of the word **fear**, it has a **negative** connotation - one of **terror** or **dread**. However, that’s **not**

what it means here. A good example of the **correct** meaning can be found in the Scriptures themselves, when the Psalmist wrote, *“But with you there is **pardon**, so you are **feared**.”* Now obviously, receiving **pardon** or **forgiveness** from God is nothing of which to be **afraid**. Rather, it’s just the **opposite**. Receiving this gift makes us want to **honor** and **respect** the LORD who has removed the **burden** and **guilt** of sin from our lives. And that’s **exactly** what it means **here** when Joshua tells the people to **fear** the LORD. They are to **honor** and **respect** Him out of **love**.

Quite naturally, **serving** the LORD will **follow** that love and respect. Yet, Joshua left the **choice** up to the people themselves. He said, *“But if you see no **benefit** in serving the **LORD**, then **choose** for yourselves today whomever you **will** serve - whether the gods that your **fathers** served 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**.”* The Israelites had a **choice** to make - a choice between **false** gods and the **true** God - a choice between powerless **idols**; whether from beyond the Euphrates **River**, or from **Egypt**, or from the **local** area; and the **Almighty God** who had brought them to where they were, and who **continued** to watch **over** them and **provide** for all their needs.

Joshua had **his** mind all made up. No matter **what** the Israelites chose for themselves, **he** and his **family** would serve the **LORD**. I’m sure that Joshua had hoped the Israelites would **emulate** his bold and sincere confession. But even if they **didn’t**, Joshua was ready to go it **alone**. It turned out that Joshua would have **lots** of company, for our text concludes, *“The people responded by saying, ‘Far be it from **us** to forsake the LORD in order to serve **other** gods! For the LORD our God, he is the one who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, where we were **slaves**. He is the one who performed these great **signs** right before our eyes and **protected** us on the whole journey that we made and among all the peoples through whom we passed. The LORD drove out of our presence all the peoples and the **Amorites** who were living in the land. **We Too Will Serve The LORD**, because He is **our God!**’”*

The choice was an **easy** one for the Israelites at **Shechem**, but it wouldn’t **continue** to be so easy for the **future** generations. We soon hear the writer of the Book of Judges tell us, *“After that whole **generation** had been gathered to their fathers, **another** generation arose after them, who did not know the **LORD** or the deeds that he had **done** for Israel. The people of Israel committed **evil** in the eyes of the LORD. They served the **Baals**, and they **abandoned** the **LORD**, the God of their **fathers**, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after **other** gods from among the gods of the peoples who were **around** them. They bowed*

down to them, and they **angered** the LORD. They **abandoned** the LORD and served the Baals and the **Ashtartes**.” That sounds all too **familiar**, doesn’t it? People start out **strong**, but their strength quickly **fades away**. Just to **illustrate** that, think about your **confirmation day**, and how **easy** it was for you to make that promise to suffer **all**, even **death**, rather than fall away from the LORD. And **compare** that with how many of your **friends** from your confirmation days no longer **follow** the LORD at **all**. Or, think about your **wedding day**, and how **easy** it was for you to promise to live together as husband and wife **regardless** of the circumstances, until parted by **death**. And **compare** that with how 1 out of every 2 marriages in our society **fails**, because of a lack of **commitment** to their marriage vows. All too often as time goes on, the realities of **sin** and **temptation** take their **toll**. People begin to **question**, to **doubt**, and to **wonder** whether they really made the **right** choices after all.

How will **we** be sure? Our choices in life must find their foundation in the same thing which led to **Joshua’s** bold and sincere confession of faith and trust. Joshua was moved **only** by what **God** had done - not by **any** other influences. **Nothing** can **change** what God has done for us - **nothing!** God the Father **created** and **preserves** us - that’s a **fact**. Jesus loved us so much that He lived a perfect **life** for us, and then **offered** that life as a sacrifice on the **cross** to **pay** for our sins - **that’s** a fact. And the Holy Spirit gave us our **faith** and keeps that faith **strong** through God’s **Word** and **Sacraments** - that’s a fact **too**. **Nothing** can **change** those facts, so shouldn’t our choices always be **easy**? Today, let’s **reconfirm** our commitment to God with **actions** - by getting **rid** of the false gods in our lives, whether they are physical **objects**, or other **people**, or **attitudes** of the heart. If the things in our life don’t fit into the **LORD’s plan** for our life, then they don’t **belong** in our life at **all**. God tolerates **no** rivals. So, let’s **rededicate** ourselves to our **marriages**, to our study of God’s **Word**, to the **work** which the LORD has given us to do for Him in this life, and indeed let us rededicate ourselves to the LORD **Himself**, as we say with Joshua and the Israelites in our text, “***We Too Will Serve The LORD.***” Amen.