

## November 8<sup>th</sup> Worship

### Readings

#### Joshua 24:1-3

#### The Covenant Renewed at Shechem

24 Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges, and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. <sup>3</sup> But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac,

#### Joshua 24:14-25

<sup>14</sup> “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

<sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! <sup>17</sup> It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

<sup>19</sup> Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake

the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

<sup>21</sup> But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

<sup>22</sup> Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

<sup>23</sup> “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

<sup>24</sup> And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

<sup>25</sup> On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws.

## **Matthew 25:1-13**

### **The Parable of the Ten Virgins**

<sup>25</sup> “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. <sup>4</sup> The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

<sup>6</sup> “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

<sup>7</sup> “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

<sup>9</sup> “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

<sup>10</sup> “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

<sup>11</sup> “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

<sup>12</sup> “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

<sup>13</sup> “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

### *Choosing a Future*

A few years ago, I took our exchange student with me as I went grocery shopping. I don’t remember which country she was representing (we’ve had seven); what I do remember is her commenting about all the choices there were – so many that she had a hard time deciding. From T.V. channels to the kind of cars we drive – so many things to choose among. Choosing is so much a part of our every day – but that seems such a trite statement in the face of a national election. And we know our choices have consequences. Joshua was trying to make that very point. After Moses died, leadership of the Hebrew people had been passed to Joshua as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Much of Joshua’s story is a story of conquest but as Joshua nears the end of his life, he recounts for the people all that God has done for them and asks if they will serve the Lord faithfully, putting away any idols or other false gods. When the people answer “yes” they will serve the Lord – at first Joshua challenges their response. It’s as if he believes it will be difficult if not impossible for them to be faithful to God. I believe Joshua knew that ‘choosing God’ was not just an individual choice but one that could affect others around them. An example of that kind of choice that’s close to me is when people talk about “school choice”. Studies are showing that unless that school is for a particular purpose – like schools that are developed for the arts or say a focus on medical skills – most of the others don’t provide much more in academics than regular public schools – but they often leave out minority students or those with

disabilities. What they do instead is decrease the resources available to regular public schools. Maybe it's a case of unintended consequences, but it is part of choosing.

As I was preparing this sermon there were many comments from people who said that they had plaques on the walls of their home that said, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." It made me pause, do we even stop to think of the choices in our lives that get in the way of serving God? We may not have little fetishes sitting around, but how many other things become our modern idols?

In thinking about making choices – I've been reading a book about ministry. In it there is a fascinating example. When Lewis and Clark were asked by President Jefferson to explore a Northwest Passage, they thought this was an interesting challenge and anticipated a water connection such that they would be able to canoe across the continent. But they met a huge challenge at the Continental Divide. It was not just one mountain to climb but mountains beyond mountains. There was no canoeing those mountains. This was *not* what they had signed up for; there was no direct water route across the country. They could have simply said there is no such route, these mountains are too tough and headed home. But Lewis had a 'passionate purpose' that went beyond personal gain. It grew out of values of education, exploration and service to others and that passion led them on. The choice they made required them to *think differently* about the challenge before them. It wasn't about power or ego but discerning what they were really called to do, but that meant exploration and learning something new. We know that they had help – like Sacajawea – or they probably wouldn't have survived some of the challenges. Though we don't hear talk of following God on this

journey, I think we can talk of our having a passionate purpose in a similar way. So it made me wonder about the choices we need to make as a church. Do we have deep guiding principles or purposes that influence the decisions we make? Are we asking God for guidance about the deeper implications of our decisions and our direction for the future? There have been good efforts to explore a variety of solutions, but are there questions remaining unanswered? If so, do we need to seek other help? What I do know is this church isn't the only one facing such questions. And it's also apparent that some of the answers that have come are not the ones we had been anticipating. Not choosing has consequences too.

I know making good choices isn't always easy. I love the story told by John Lewis of when he was a young child. He tells about being with his siblings and cousins about 15 children in all when a storm starts coming in. His Aunt Seneva was the only adult around and her house was quite small, but the storm was getting worse, so Aunt Seneva had to make a quick choice. She had all the children get in a line and take each other's hands and she took them into the house. When the wind got so bad it was lifting corners of the house, she had them walk toward whichever corner of the room that was rising – back and forth. 15 small children holding the house down in a terrible storm.

I'm sure they were all terribly frightened but together they kept each other – and perhaps that little house safe – walking with the wind. Perhaps we don't feel in as dangerous a situation as John Lewis describes but there is some sense that you move from one situation to another to keep things together, each taking your focus away from the ministry of the church.

Doing something to be prepared for the future is imperative. It is the choice before you. I believe that's the focus of the parable of the 10 maids. Each had a

lamp – they were at least that ready as they waited for the groom to arrive for the wedding feast. But only five had brought extra oil – so when the groom was late, five were prepared but the other five were off trying to find more oil. I've long found this a bit troubling, (why no sharing?) but we need to remember some of Matthew's focus is on every person doing the work of being faithful which isn't something someone else can do for you. It seems he is harkening back to the beatitudes (Mt.5:16) to "let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to you Father in heaven". How do we let our light shine in this time? Caring for the hungry, the sick, those on the margins of society, welcoming strangers – those are all things Jesus reminded us of. One of the challenges as I see it is to believe in the Good News of the Gospel and then make our choices – remembering what God has done and believing we are called to be part of a future we may only glimpse today.