

The people of Israel are now residents of Canaan. According to the book of Joshua, the conquest is complete. The land has been divided among the tribes, and we leap forward to the final chapter. The people gather at Shechem, not too far north of Jerusalem. This was the site of a pagan shrine. It was here that Abraham built an altar to commemorate his meeting with God; here Jacob, returning from Haran, set up camp, bought land, and erected an altar; here Joseph was buried. Our reading describes a treaty between God and the people.

Those who gathered there that day were given a choice as to whether they worship God or the local gods, even the gods of their ancestors, as Abraham’s father did, but Joshua and his household elect to serve God. The people, recognizing all God has done for them, do choose to serve him. They may also stay on the other side of the Euphrates River.

In this passage there are well-known words. “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” Perhaps you have either seen this framed or even have it hanging in your home. It is a favorite motto for needlepoint makers. It is often framed in tile or textile, even carved in wood. This fragment has been rendered into words of comfort, and one can see why. But the edginess of the intent of these words is made sugary in the absence of the beginning part, “Choose this day whom you will serve.” The choice is real, it has consequences, and it either keeps us moving forward as a gathered community into the future, or it sets others of us apart, on the far side of the river, believing and serving the old ways.

It is a time when people gather and choose to find a theological home together with a broader understanding of what or whom their God is to them. They reject the smaller household gods, the cultural gods, the gods made so one-dimensional because they have never stood up to questioning. These people have been asked to choose this day whom they will serve—and to cross over the river of the past into a new community.

This is a theme I can work with today. I want to talk about the church.

Our religious structures are being tossed and battered in the giant paradigm shifts that are happening all around the world, and the majority has chosen to hunker down and tie their fortunes to the old ways.

How many there are who long to serve the gods on the other side of the river—remembering a time when life was different for the majority. In a neater time here in the United States, television shows such as, “Leave it to Beaver” depicted a norm where nuclear families lived in tidy homes where dad made the living and mom managed to look beautiful, vacuuming while wearing pearls and an apron. These were days when safety, plenty and conformity reigned, and the gods of order and abundance held sway. The American god protected the land, and because of this, all was right with the world.

Whether it was an accurate picture or not, many remember with longing what the not too distant past held, and remain on the far side of the river worshipping what either cannot or may not be. The privilege accorded to some in those days is no more.

Theologian Susan Henry-Crowe writes: “The ancestral gods of the Israelite people provided many of the same benefits. Tied geographically to the land they protected, these gods guaranteed security and abundance to all who lived within their embrace.

“The place of belonging, even if it is in bondage, may be better than wandering around unsettled, homeless, hungry and unknown. It would be difficult for the people to face the future in a

new land with different promises, different expectations, different dreams, and a new understanding of God.”¹

What in the last thirty years became the dominant voice and expression of the church in America is now moving into exile. It is thrashing about ungracefully in its slow diminishment. It made the mistake of allying itself with a political ideology. It pressed the divorce papers with Science to become finalized; feeling threatened instead of embracing the very science that leads to the ongoing discovery that the Creative Spark of the universe must be more awe-inspiring than anything we could imagine. Finally, it has allied itself with the powers of a status quo that would work against the best interests of the most marginalized people in society, in a complete reversal of the gospel where the rich are blessed, and the poor despised.

I bring this to the table today, because I want to know on what side of the river do you stand? Here in this place, to whom do you belong? What theological home provides sustenance as well as room to explore? If you have always been here, or if you have recently crossed over, do you see the importance, as I do, of making room so that this free expression of faith can be shared by more until there is no need or desire for a small faith born of fear, but for one that fully embraces the future? If this is yours—then claim it.

The psalmist sings of the temple—“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord.” And, “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you...”

This is a great time and place in which we can live out what it means to be “church.” It is also an important time for us to be prepared to welcome the religious refugees—those who no longer feel that they belong in the traditions from which they came.

I mention this because we are about to take a big leap of faith together as a congregation. We are a progressive Christian church in a theologically conservative part of the country, and we are going to call a full-time associate pastor without having the full means in hand to do so. Our search committee continues to work hard to find the right person, and I will join them soon in this discernment process. We are a progressive church in all that entails. To new pastors coming out of seminary, this is where the future of the church will be, and they want to be a part of the excitement. I want you to be a part of this excitement also—we are a church with a mission in this community.

Your church has done so much—but I challenge you today to share what we have here even more with the community around us. The leap in faith we are about to take may bring a greater focus on young adults and young families. It may enable us to become more involved with justice issues in the world, and small group encounters within. Last year, we hosted Sister Helen Prejean—next year it will be Bishop John Shelby Spong.

Get to know your church. Come to one of the new offerings that you will be seeing in the bulletins and on the website. You belong—and you belong along with an amazing collection of people. Find someone today that you have never spoken with before and get to know him or her better. I know most of you—I promise you will be very pleasantly surprised. You belong. These are your people.

A special, broader witness is needed in the world today—it has to be one that embraces faith, while at the same time being unafraid to question. It must be a presence that witnesses to the marginalized in the face of the status-quo—whether it is the immigrant, the person without health care, or the LGBT youth who is being harassed or threatened at school.

I bring three examples of the importance of being this special faith witness to our world, from yesterday’s Los Angeles’ Times.

First, “Bringing Science Back into America’s Sphere.”² In this article, it is demonstrated that America has become “unscientific” and has backed away from the promises of future great

discoveries because of a retreat from the pursuit of science, largely due to a fearful brand of religion that teaches, for example, that evolution is an attack on their moral universe. Today, half of Americans do not know that the earth revolves around the sun once a year. In fact, 18% of the population believes that the sun revolves around the earth.

We can do better. We can embrace the wisdom and teaching of Jesus Christ, and embrace science also as not two mutually exclusive desires. Let's build that church and others like it, and invite those on the other side of the river to cross over.

Second, an article called, "At the Free Clinic, Scenes from the Third World."³ Because of the growing numbers of people with no insurance, a free clinic that was started to help people in third world countries without access to health-care, is turning people away locally because of the sheer volume of those who have needed care, and who have been living in pain. Juxtapose this against the reactionary news and talk radio outlets who scare their viewers about a change in our health care system, send them into town halls to be disruptive, and then report on it as if it were news instead of their own fabrication born out of the incitement of fear and distortion.

We can do better. We can embrace the justice and mercy of Jesus Christ, and embrace the pursuit of justice and mercy for our own citizens and the citizens of the world. Let's build the kind of church that brings a truthful message into the town square.

Finally, the decision made on Friday at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's annual gathering to ordain gay and lesbian pastors made the front page. This came on the heels of the decision by the Episcopal Church to do the same. Recognizing worth without prejudice in all of God's people will continue to move slowly through the body of Christ, but it had to start somewhere. It began here in the United Church of Christ with the ordination of Bill Johnson in 1972.

We are that church. We can embrace the love of Jesus Christ, and embrace the belief that God's mercy is wider than anything we could apportion ourselves.

A church that knows who it is and why it exists will find the means to become the church that God is calling it to be. Is this *your* church? Is it one that you wish more could share in? Have you worked to find a sense of community here for yourself?

Author Ann Weems is reminded of the time she was in Wisconsin leading a worship service at a Conference. Before supper that first night, a man with a southern accent came up to her and asked, "Where are you from?" When she said, "Nashville," he smiled and said, "I knew that. Who are your people?" Ann recalls that a surge of memories swept over her. She saw faces and names and even smelled some of the sweet aromas associated with home. She had answered the question before: when she went to college in Memphis and when she had married and her name changed. She writes, "I knew what it meant: To whom do you belong? It is an ancient question. It is a means of identification, a claiming of ties. It can instantly open doors or shut them in your face."

"My father is Tom Barr," Ann replied. His face lit up with a look of recognition. He told the people with him, "She's one of us! She's Tom Barr's daughter." They gathered around and led her to their table, talking about people they knew twenty-five years ago in Nashville. "We dashed back in time and it felt right," Ann recalled. "I belonged. I was accepted. I know who my people are."⁵

Thanks to those who met in a schoolroom thirty years ago to start a church. Thanks to the visionary leadership both in your former pastor and in each of you who has helped to bring us to the taking of a big new step together. Thanks to those who have come in the last few months and years who want to put down roots and share in the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. You belong. You know who your people are. Amen.

Sermon Resources

1. Susan Henry-Crowe in, "Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B," by David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor. (Westminster John Knox Press/Louisville 2007) p. 366
2. "Bringing Science Back into America's Sphere," by Chris Mooney. Los Angeles Times, August 22, 2009
3. "At the Free Clinic, Scenes from the Third World," by Steve Lopez, Los Angeles Times, August 22, 2009 (letters) Article appeared on August 16, 2009
4. "Lutherans Lift Barrier on Gay Clergy," by Doug Helfand. Los Angeles Times, August 22, 2009
5. Ann Weems, "Family Faith Stories" (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) p. 18-19.

Scripture for Sunday, August 23, 2009

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. **2** And Joshua said to all the people,

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." **16** Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; **17** for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; **18** and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

Psalms 84:1-6

1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! **2** My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. **3** Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. **4** Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. (Selah) **5** Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. **6** As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.