

“Fat Envelopes”

“Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve … but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

“*Did you get the fat envelope or the thin envelope?*”

It was a question that echoed through the hallways of North Plainfield High School during my senior (Grade 12) year, when my classmates and I were waiting for responses from colleges and universities to which we had replied. The fat envelope was the one you wanted, because even before you opened it you knew that you had been accepted, since it contained registration, financial aid, and other important information for incoming students. The thin envelope, on the other hand, meant that you had not been accepted to this school, or at best were placed on the waiting list. Every morning, we asked each other if there was an envelope in our mailboxes the previous day, and if it was the fat one we all wanted.

I was truly fortunate when I found two fat envelopes in our mailbox from the two universities to which I applied. Both were small, church-related schools in Pennsylvania that we had visited the summer before my senior year, along with a few other schools to which I did not apply. I was thrilled to receive these fat envelopes from Ursinus College and Susquehanna University – but then I was faced with the most important choice of my young life. Where should I go to university? Which school would be the best one for me; which one would give me the best education and experience? They were both exceptionally good schools – but which one would be the school that would assist me in my life and career? It was an arduous decision, but finally I chose Ursinus; and as Robert Frost wrote, that choice “*has made all the difference*,” because at Ursinus I was blessed with great teachers and mentors who taught me, challenged me, and encouraged me as I grew both as a student and in discerning my call to ordained ministry. I am not sure how different my life would be if I had chosen Susquehanna, but I am thankful for the choice that I made between those two “fat envelopes.”

There are moments in our lives when we are faced with choices that will shape our future, choices between two or more options that will have great consequences for every day that is ahead of us. It may be the choice of school, or careers, or where we will live. It may be the choice of the person with whom we will spend our lives; it may be the choice of the home we buy or the car we drive or if we will have children. It may be the choice of faith, whether we will join a church or practice a religion. A hallmark of humanity is our ability to make choices; and what we choose will often “make all the difference” in the shape of our lives.

In today’s First Lesson, Joshua challenges the people of Israel to make a choice that will shape the future course of their lives as a nation. As the successor of Moses, Joshua gathers “*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." (Joshua 24:1). Shechem was in the highlands of Israel, a region assigned to the tribes of Joseph whose origin dates to the call of Abraham in Genesis:

- "Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him." – Genesis 12:6-7.

Joshua gathers the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel for his farewell address to reinvigorate the people's commitment to the LORD who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and given them victory in their battles for the Promised Land. His speech is meant to "*underline the continuity of Joshua's authority with that of Moses and reinforce the importance of covenant renewal for the ongoing faithfulness of God's people*" (Carolyn J. Sharp). Joshua takes on the role of a prophet in speaking on behalf of God, reminding them of God's faithfulness and challenging them to respond in an appropriate manner:

- "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many." – 24:2-3.

In the following verses that are not included in today's lesson, Joshua powerfully articulates the grounds on which the Israelites should be grateful to God, beginning with the blessing God bestows on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to God's liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt to their being led into the Promised Land, where God "*gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.*" (24:13). This recitation of the history of God's faithfulness toward Israel "*teaches the people to know themselves as constituted and preserved by God's marvelous grace even now – fully in continuity with the redemption enjoyed by generations past.*" (Sharp).

But Joshua's purpose is not to merely offer a history lesson; it is for the purpose of challenging Israel to make a decision for or against the God of this recital – and consequently for or against the alternative gods "*beyond the River and in Egypt*" (24:14). The purpose of this meeting at Shechem "*is one of serious, even dangerous adjudication, in order to decide the truth of competing gods, based on competing testimonies.*" (Walter Brueggemann). The central concern here is the apostasy and idolatry of the Israelites, who apparently assume naively that they can serve both the LORD and other gods at the same time. These are the same people who had idolatrously worshiped a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they "*offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.*" (Exodus 32:6) and were constantly enticed by the gods of the Canaanites among whom they lived. Joshua knew that they would continue to be tempted to choose allegiance to these false gods; so he boldly challenges them to make a choice of who they will worship and serve:

- "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.

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.” – 24:14-15.

Joshua challenges the leaders of the people of Israel to forswear any allegiance to foreign gods who are either to the east in Mesopotamia, where Abraham left to migrate to Canaan, or the Amorites of the conquered land. Joshua’s rehearsal of their ancestors’ history and his concern for idolatry places him in the tradition of Moses who challenged the nation to remain loyal to the God of their ancestors who had brought them *“out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* (Exodus 20:2).

- “Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure – the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now.” – Deuteronomy 4:15-20.

A choice between serving the God of Israel and other gods is like the challenge Elijah makes to the Israelites at Mount Carmel: *“How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”* (1 Kings 18:21). Their decisions to seek after other gods results in their being judged for their unfaithfulness to the true God of Israel:

- “Yet you have abandoned me and worshipped other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of distress.” – Judges 10:13-14.

The people are constantly challenged to place their confidence in the God of Israel, the one true God whose faithfulness is contrasted with the futility that results in worshipping false gods:

- “Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination.” – Isaiah 41:23-24.

There is no ambiguity in Joshua’s challenge at Shechem: either the people will serve the LORD or other gods – they cannot do both. In the words of Bob Dylan, *“it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”*

In their response, the leaders of Israel affirm their faithfulness to the Lord God of Israel; they have no intention of forsaking the Lord to go after other gods: *“Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 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.” (24:16-17). Their affirmation that “we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God” (24:18) expresses the essence of Israel as a confederation whose principle of unity is religious, rooted in the *shema*, which calls upon the people to “hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The community that is set in motion by Joshua at Shechem “continues wherever this decision for loyalty is undertaken. Israel’s decision for loyalty to Yahweh is in the presence and awareness of alternative loyalties, here vigorously and intentionally rejected.” (Brueggemann).

The choice that confronts the people of Israel at Shechem is a choice that has constantly confronted God’s people in every generation. Israel would continue to be tempted to turn away from God to the gods of their neighbours who allure could be quite powerful but would ultimately prove to be powerless. The prophets were sent to call on the nation to forswear such misguided allegiance and repent of their faithlessness and idolatry, of failing to observe the First Commandment that “you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3). The call to repentance is a call to turn around, to turn away from placing one’s confidence in false gods and return to the LORD as the source of true blessing and strength:

- “Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” – Joel 2:12-13.

The coming of Jesus in the Gospels presented people with a decision as to who he is and whether or not they would follow the one who is “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14). When Jesus asks his disciples “*who do you say that I am?*” Peter’s response expresses the faith of those who have chosen to follow Jesus: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:15-16). When many of his would-be disciple “*turned their back and no longer went about with him,*” Peter’s resilience embodies the faithfulness of those who place their faith and confidence in Christ: “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*” (John 6:66-69). Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter boldly proclaims to the crowds on the day of Pentecost the faith that is the foundation of the Church: “*Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*” (Acts 2:36).

The faith upon which the Church of Jesus Christ continues to stand is rooted in a decision that confronts each of us. When we are baptized, we stand in the place of the people of Israel at Shechem, challenged to “*choose this day whom you will serve.*” When through water and the Word we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ*” (ELW Holy Baptism) we join with our ancestors in faith in both confessing our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and in renouncing allegiance to “*the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... and the ways of sin that draw you from God.*” It is a decision that we affirm at Confirmation, when we profess that “*we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God*” (Joshua 24:18) as we vow to “*proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.*” Every day, we are challenged to live as God’s faithful people, people who

“come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” (Small Catechism). Every generation of God’s people stands at Shechem, challenged as to whether they will remain faithful to the Lord of the Church or to seek after gods – gods of self-centeredness, gods of status, gods of wealth, gods of power, gods of hatred and division. Too many churches have made the wrong choice; they may claim to believe in Christ, but their common life betrays a lack of faith in our Lord and a devotion to other gods that sews the seeds of their own destruction. The words of the great hymn remind us that the *“church of Christ, in every age, beset by change but Spirit-led, must claim and test its heritage and keep in rising from the dead”* (ELW Hymn 729). We need to stand at Shechem and share the faith of Joshua that this household of faith will serve the Lord as *“a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ’s sacrifice, and clothed in Christ’s humanity.”* We need to ensure that our church remains rooted in the solid rock that is Christ Jesus our Lord, for *“all other ground is sinking sand.”* (ELW Hymn 597).

- “Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatsoever ... Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by; and that has made all the difference.” – Robert Frost.

The fat envelopes we received in high school presented us with a challenge to make a decision that would affect the course of our lives. Our “fat envelopes” come in both the blessings that God abundantly bestows upon us and the challenge to live thankfully and faithfully as God desires. When we as God’s people in this place stand at our Shechem, may our words reflect the decision that Joshua and generations of our ancestors have made; may we as the household of God’s people in this place make the decision to serve the Lord.

Amen.