

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 16
RCL Lectionary, Year B

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 / Psalm 34:15-22 / Ephesians 6:10-20 / John 6:56-69

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Choice, Control, and Salvation

by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

In one of her sermons at General Convention this year, our Presiding Bishop generated a great deal of chatter and some heat by remarking that one of the great heresies of the West was the notion of individual salvation – that is, the idea that the individual can live into the full transformative power of God’s grace on one’s own. It’s what we hear when we use the evangelical refrain of talking about Jesus as “personal Lord and savior,” isn’t it?

While proclaiming this notion of individual salvation a heresy raised the ire of many in the church both at home and abroad – particularly amongst our more evangelical sisters and brothers – I think ++Katharine Jefferts Schori said something truly traditional, truly orthodox Christian, and indeed, truly Anglican. One of our great challenges in the West is that we hear “personal” as “private.” We think of our path with God as disconnected and somewhat hidden and distinct from the paths of others. We tend to view our portion of grace much as we view our own bank accounts or property – somewhat guarded and secure. . . set apart just for the all-important “me.” And if I do share my faith with others, it’s much as I would share any service I receive. Like a placard I saw for Citibank the other day about the \$100 bonus I could receive if I referred enough friends or relatives to the bank to open new accounts. Sometimes we see evangelism that way. For every soul I win for Christ, the almighty “I” gets a bonus for my own salvation account.

Perhaps more than with salvation, we play this individualistic game with choice, too. We believe that we *choose* our paths as individuals. Choice is a precious commodity in our culture, and the more wealth and education we have the more choices we ostensibly have. . .and therefore the more power and control we believe we have over our own destiny. Indeed, we struggle for control, but the older I get the more I see how small choices made long ago have profound and unforeseen consequences on the direction of life much later. It could be argued our lives are a string of choices, linked together and mutually interdependent. Some individual choices are moral. Some are indifferent. Some have enormous impact, others little. But our ability to see the difference at any given moment is severely hindered by our human limitations of vision, of knowledge, of perspective. Even our best choices are profoundly contingent on what precious little we know, what modicum of wisdom we have been given. And rarely do our choices turn out to have the consequences we entirely intend. Despite every advance in our civilization, we continue to live in a universe where so much is out of our control. The most important thing we

learn is that our lives depend only somewhat on our individual choices. They depend much more so on the choices of others...many others...and even more critically on the choices we make together.

“As for me and my household...” These are some of my favorite words in all of scripture. They point to the profound humility to which we are all called in a world of choices, a sea of options, even without a great deal of control. But more than that is the truth of “me and my household. . .” and that is our individual choices are not, in reality, as individual as we thought. They impact others, they influence others, and they only really matter when they are made in concert with the choices of others. What *we* choose to bind our life to matters, and that choice itself influences our collective future. Joshua knew this as he led God’s people into the Promised Land. And he recognized, as a leader, his choices only really mattered, as did those of his household and his people, if they were choices that were consonant with their common story, consonant with their shared heritage of exodus. In the face of a wide variety of traditions and practices amongst the peoples they were encountering and their past, to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was their only option if the Israelites were to survive *as Israelites*. If they splintered into a hundred or a thousand individual choices, they would cease to be a people; they would never be able to build a nation together in a new land.

Many of you know the challenges of living in households of multiple faiths. Happily, we are taught to value difference in our culture, to find diversity of many kinds invigorating and enriching. Few of us hold to the strict, and indeed violent ways purity was maintained in Joshua's day. But we also know that even the most pluralistic, diverse household must hold some common values, a core of shared truths that keep us together in community. For me, that is the best of what is meant by "me and my household." The Israelites were always a diverse people, too. But what mattered to their shared identity as a household of faith was what they held in common in the midst of their diversity – their one God – and that is where Joshua most speaks to us this day.

Peter's choice in today's Gospel is not simply the choice of an individual apostle, either. For the earliest audience of John's version of the Gospel, Peter represents the proto-church, the faithful founders who stuck close with Christ even as a world questioned their choice with disdain, if not persecution. Peter's choice, the choice of the twelve apostles, and therefore the choice of the early church, is simple, but not simplistic: "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Even if Jesus' Eucharistic teaching remains enigmatic and somewhat offensive, it holds a promise of hope that shines light into a darkened world.

But closer to us millennia later, Peter's words echo the choices – the commitments that hold this Christian household together: the commitments that keep us together through thick and thin. It's the string of choices amid a contingent life that connect God's faithful in every generation with the communion of saints. These are they who have recognized in their own times the value of covenant, the refusal to walk away from their God in difficult times. It's the stuff we see in our most hallowed friendships and relationships. An insistence on the integrity of "me and my household" to our God even when the going is rough, even when we know we're not in control of outcomes. A commitment to follow after God in Christ, even when we're unsure of where we

are being led. To acknowledge together that we are not ultimately in control, but we covenant to go together after the one who is called alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

This day, we celebrate again a marriage that began with vows before that same God in this parish fifty years ago. We celebrate it not simply for Kitty and Scott, but for the witness of faith it represents in a world of choices. It's a Christian witness for the spiritual power of "as for me and my household" for all of us living in community, married or not, young folk and old, rich, poor, and in between.

By virtue of their vows, Kitty and Scott *are* a household, if I may be so bold. Fifty years has born that out. Like all couples they made a choice decades ago to join together to become something more than simply a couple. Remember that the community of marriage is like greater community: it is more than simply individuals sharing a common life. Their life together reflects the life of the greater household of God: Christ and the Church together, where we are so much more than the sum of our parts. As time passes, they reckoned more clearly in the chances and strange turns of this life, that what really mattered was the foundational choice of navigating life together. Marriage didn't necessarily give them control. It gave them something much more important: the abundant grace that comes through relationship. And relationship is about relinquishing some degree of our limited control for the more intangible but Spirit-filled goods of love, faith, and even new and transformed life.

Today, we also embrace another choice: one mutually made between Willie Van Doren, our new youth minister, our young people, and the search committee who worked with me to call him here, and, of course, we believe, God, too. This is another commitment that will be more than the sum of its parts. With his new leadership, our EPIC youth group hopes to strive and thrive to become a greater community – one where the false notions of individual control give way to mutual trust, friendship in the Gospel, respect, and the transformative life that comes when we follow after Christ not as individuals, but together as a household.

So as time passes, we reckon more clearly the full import of the choice of Peter and a handful of disciples in the first century, the choice of our spiritual ancestors and sisters and brothers who still, through story, prayer, and sacrament, remain near us. We reckon that we are not individuals, atomized and fragmented, struggling for control, but rather a household together – the Household of God, working to build new life with our Creator. We have indeed come together by choice. But we move forward together by grace. And we celebrate that grace today as we remember why we are here: because God in Christ Jesus has the words of eternal life.