Join me in prayer: Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we reflect on it, open our hearts and our minds to hear the lessons for us today. Amen.

At least part of today’s scripture might be familiar to you. The ending of verse 15 ‘as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” has been printed on plaques and posters; even embroidered on doilies and pillows. But our focus today will be on the first part of verse 15 ‘choose this day whom you will serve.’

You have just heard some of the context of this scripture. The Israelites have entered the promised land. The land of milk and honey promised by God to Moses as he led God’s people out of Egypt. It has been a long journey beginning with a rescue from slavery in Egypt that included God parting waters and making a path for his people to escape, then wandering years in the desert completely reliant on God for food and water, to receiving the 10 commandment rules to live by, and lastly even losing Moses their leader. Joshua, the successor of Moses follows instructions from God and ends the journey as it started by leading the Israelites across parted waters, this time the Jordan River, to the promised land on the other side.

It has been a hard journey. And as our scripture says, the challenges continue in this new land of many resources inhabited by people who do not know God. People who outnumber the Israelites. Without the advantage of strength and weapons it was only with God’s intervention that the Israelite people settled here and made it their home. In verse 12-13 God says to the Israelites “it was not by your sword or by your bow. **13** I 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 olive yards that you did not plant.”

The Israelites took the gift of this whole new world for granted. They became comfortable and began taking on the customs of the people who inhabited the land before them. They were beginning to take for granted the God who had given them this whole new world. Joshua had to remind God’s people that this Whole new world they were enjoying was a gift from God. The result of a promise. . . Now when I hear the phrase ‘a whole new world’ I think of a song from the Disney movie Aladdin and a line in that song that says, “A new fantastic point of view.” What if we find a new fantastic point of view?

Many of us have experienced struggles through this time of quarantine, shut down, and loss during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now we have our own whole new world emerging and all the imagined perfectness that comes with it. A new fantastic point of view. We have the opportunity to choose to create new patterns of life after a year away from our busyness. So, what does your imagined perfect life include? For the Hebrew people it included living on fertile lands they could call their own. Lands of abundance. They imagined a life of promises fulfilled and God gave it to them. They now were in a land free of any enemies, already cleared, plowed, and planted. They ate from vineyards and olive groves already nurtured and producing grapes and olives. They lived in cities built by others that now they ruled over. All provided by God. But as they became comfortable in this new world, they lost sight of God.

Before Joshua died, he gathered the people of God and confronted them, challenging them: choose *this day* who you will serve. This is a challenge for all God’s people every day. Choose who you will serve. Now I realize I am speaking with those who have clearly made their choice today. After all you are choosing to participate with me either here in person or by computer. But what about tomorrow? Who will you choose to serve? In this time of a whole new world, we have the opportunity even the privilege to choose! We *need* to choose. We must choose to intentionally serve God every day.

Now choosing is not as easy as it seems. Did you know the act of choosing is scientifically shown to be physically exhausting? Too many choices and we may avoid choosing all together. We like to default to a choosing of familiarity – habit. Our brain makes many choices for us based on our history of personal experience and emotions. If a choice resulted in a good feeling, we are likely to make that choice again. We also make choices based on the opinion of others or our how we anticipate others will react. We seek the approval of others and want to follow the crowd, or we just skip the choosing all together.

People tend to not want change. It’s too hard. It’s much easier to follow. People don’t want to be different or start something new. I experienced this after newly married and before having children when my husband and I moved to a new city and simply did not choose to find a church to attend. It seemed like a lot of hard work. We moved around and I got out of the habit of intentionally serving God. I worked in an office Monday through Friday and thought of the weekend as my free time. I slept in, ate out, traveled, explored. I showed kindness to others, but I was not thinking about a bigger picture. I had not lost my belief, only my involvement. I forgot what living into a faith community was like.

It was not until we became a family of five with young children that I began to think about how I wanted them to grow up. I had wonderfully magical memories of Christmas Cantatas late on Christmas Eve. I remembered the sacred feeling that came over me watching people walk up front for communion. I remember the adults who showed up to teach me in Sunday school and vacation Bible school. I remember my grandmother singing louder than anyone else. I remembered being welcomed into my friend's youth group activities. I can still see faces (though I have long forgotten names) of the adults who taught me, who showed up and made me feel like I have a place where I belong. That’s what I decided I wanted to pass down to my children. So, when a neighbor invited us to church, we went. We participated.

My children are grown now, young adults, but they still have Bibles and hymnals given to them in the second grade. They still have their confirmation banners. They have memories of Ms. Wanda giving full size candy bars if you could name all the disciples. They have memories of Ms. Gloria giving them little angels and Reverend Ray playing with them in the parking lot. They remember ‘the big kids’ from church who played with them at home gatherings and the ones who babysat them. They remember Ms. Iris inviting the families from church to come swim in her pool – she always had popsicles. They remember powder sugar donuts after worship. They have memories of feeling included, appreciated, and wanted. I know those feelings are attached to them like a bungee cord. And one day, maybe when they begin their own family or settle into a community, that bungee of good memories and good feelings will pull them back to the faith and help them choose to more intentionally serve God.

Some will say You can serve God without community. That may be partly true. You are serving God any time you serve others with the love of God in your heart. But you are depriving the community of faith of one piece that makes it whole. And you are depriving yourself from the joy you receive from relationships built in the community of faith. You are important to the community of faith. Your presence with your individual talents and gifts will be a blessing to someone each time you are in community. You may not know it, but I promise you are.

We have the privilege to choose to serve the Lord every single day as a response for all we have been given. If we take up the challenge it will become habit, and our brains will default to a choice of serving every day with the community of faith. But how do we get started choosing and forming that habit of serving God? We serve others. When we serve others, we are serving God. We all get a little caught up in our lives. Rarely do we get a chance to choose to hit the reset button. But we have that chance today. Each day we can choose the freedom found in service to God. Not just today, every day.

What is holding you back? What are you choosing to put first in your life?

Don’t misunderstand, I am not saying you must give up something you enjoy. I am saying choose God first. Only by choosing to serve God each day will everything else fit into our lives. Make the time to choose God. You do have the time. In fact, responding to God each day will result in the other business of life being less stressful, and becoming more meaningful and complete. But what does that look like? It looks like Jesus. Jesus came to create a whole new world. He created new rules, modeled extravagant love and radical forgiveness. Jesus taught us to serve. Letting go of self and putting the needs of others first starts to form the habit of choosing to serve God. How we use our resources is how we serve the Lord. It is as simple as a prayer of thanks at mealtime. Putting money in the hunger pot. Attending activities with the church family. Coming to worship. Inviting someone to church with you. Signing up to help serve meals to our neighbors without homes or setting up chairs for a meal in the fellowship hall. Or building relationships with children and youth. Serving God is not only the mountain top grand gestures it is also the valley work behind the scenes or at home that no one else sees or recognizes. Saying a blessing over other members of your household each evening at bedtime. Giving a child or youth a smile of acknowledgement. Modeling acceptance, seeking out relationships, and showing genuine hospitality is contagious. Those around you will see God reflected through you.

1 Corinthians 10:31 says to do all things to the glory of God. That is choosing to serve the Lord. God seeks out those who have surrendered to God. Those who put God first recognize the blessings in their life and the promises of God fulfilled. And they want to share blessings with others.

This past week another chaperone and I took three high school students to the coast for a mission trip. We used this passage as our guide for the week. We were serving God by serving others. It was a small group who had decided to surrender to this mission trip (or their parents surrendered for them). God moved our group to build relationships through our service. It was valley work, or so I thought. We were pulling weeds and clearing fences. We chopped down trees, dug out stumps, and hauled away many loads of leaves. We cleaned out a shed full of long forgotten items that was a home to bugs of all kind. It was sunny and humid making the temperatures feel like the upper 90’s. Slow and steady was this valley work of yard clearing. But on the second day I noticed a comradery building among our students and the three retired men leading our project. I noticed our students taking on a project before being asked. I noticed the men lending tools and trusting the youth to do the job. Our van ride after work was full of did you see Frank do this or Jim do that? Paul taught them about poison ivy and how to dig up stumps. While I heard much complaining about the heat or hard dirty work off the work site, our students did not complain to our project leaders and the project leaders became grateful for their help. Each group made the other group better. This choice to help serve God by serving to clean yards for two women led to forever memories full of relationship building, new skill learning and impossible work goals completed.

God gathers people for a purpose. The Lord has already chosen us. Let us respond by choosing to serve the Lord. Let us be in constant renewal of our covenant with God. We can choose to serve and worship God or do our own thing without God. We cannot do both. We can give children a clear choice by being an example for them. Accept this challenge of choosing God knowing God has already chosen us. Joshua gave the Israelites the opportunity to choose this day whom they would serve. Can we ask any less from ourselves? Can we do any less with our children?

Let us pray:

Accepting God, thank you for calling us and accepting us as your people. This day and all days we choose you. Help us to faithfully serve you in all our ways. Amen

July 4, 2021

Kim Row