

29 May 2016

Individual Transformation
Deuteronomy 7:7-11; John 15:12-25

After conquering the Promised Land, Joshua called all the Israelites together for a final speech. These Israelites are people who had seen God's mighty work up close for their whole lives, but Joshua does not take their faithfulness to God for granted. "Choose you this day whom you will serve," he commands. Joshua 24, verses 14 and 15:

'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 you 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.'

Joshua told the people they had to choose whom they were going to follow. But, as the Gospel of John reminds us, it is still God who issues the invitation. We read John 1, verses 35-51:

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Before touching on these two passages of scripture, I want to go back to the Psalm that we read responsively early in the service, Psalm 19. The past few weeks I've been talking about different paths that people take in their journey of faith. For instance, I've talked about the path of "Wonder" – followed by people who experience God in beauty and creation – and the path of

“Obedience” – which is followed by those who are geared toward decisive action and clarity. Psalm 19 has a section devoted to each of these paths of faith. First, wonder:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God
And the firmament declares His handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech
And night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
Their voice is not heard
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth
And their words to the end of the world.*

This speaker hears the voice of God in the silence between rainstorms, in the chaos of morning birdsong. Not words, not clear instructions, not theology, but the voice of God all the same. But then, sharply, the psalm shifts to Obedience in verse 7:

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.
The ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.*

It hardly sounds like the same person speaking, does it? Now the psalmist is delighting in the clarity and practical instruction found in God’s law, as communicated in scripture. But, as I have said before, both experiences are valid ways to live a life of faith. But then the psalm goes on, in verse 11:

*But who can discern his errors? Clear Thou me of hidden faults.
Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins;
Let them not have dominion over me.*

There’s an important shift here. In both of the earlier sections of the poem, the psalmist had been speaking *about* God; here, suddenly, he speaks *to* God. And what he says in essence is: “But none of this is adequate. It isn’t enough to sense God in creation or learn about God in scripture; I need you, God, to work on me, clearing out the sin that I can’t even see. I need your help individually.”

That’s where we’re going today – to that individual encounter with God, individual choosing of God, individual submission to God. Yes, as we’ve been saying, we will all follow different paths of faith, paths that will be determined largely by our personality, nature, background, and experiences. But that’s not enough. Recognizing your distinct path tells you what kind of follower of Christ you might be, but it doesn’t determine whether you’ll be a follower of Christ at all. That’s up to you. That’s your choice, and how you choose makes all the difference.

Just having a certain personality doesn't make you a Christ-follower. Just being attuned to wonder and to the miracles in all things can be a part of faith, but that personality also marks those who camp out in Nevada, looking for UFOs, and who have their palms read by middle-aged-women from New Jersey wearing turbans, and who check Astrosparkles-dot-com to consult their astrological charts, and who treat their illnesses with the natural healing powers of crystals and organic quinoa paste. We who have that capacity for wonder have the choice of whether we are going to be filled with awe at the mystery of a God beyond understanding, who nevertheless loves us and created all things good, or be filled with awe at the mystery of haunted houses and horoscopes and Bigfoot sightings. We get to choose, and it makes a difference.

Or again, having a personality that thrives on putting faith into action is a glorious gift for one who has chosen to dedicate that gift to Christ. But without that decision, we who incline toward the path of Obedience far too often become smug legalists, keeping track of our own spiritual growth by ticking off disciplines on lists, and keeping mental track of other people's lesser spirituality by comparing their list with our own. When we follow the path of Obedience, we need to remember that we follow it in the company of the man who broke Sabbath laws by healing and feeding people who needed help, broke purity laws by having dinner with the wrong sorts of people, and who had zero patience with the scribes and Pharisees who spent their time measuring the accuracy of their tithes and condemning sinners. Christ calls us to obedience, but his first command is to love, and without that, we may be following all the rules, but we are not following Christ. Again, the choice is ours.

In our reading from Joshua, Joshua had gathered all the Israelites together at Shechem for a final speech. These were people who had seen the power of God, perhaps even remembered from their childhood the day that God appeared in glory on Sinai. They had eaten the food that God had provided. They had been given the law, and – with a few missteps along the way – had obeyed God and had come into the land that God had promised his chosen people. They had all the tools, all the background, every experience necessary to follow God. But Joshua still tells them, “Choose you this day whom you will serve.” You see, having the tools isn't enough. We still have to choose for ourselves.

To summarize this sermon, and in fact the whole sermon series: we are different. We follow different paths in our journey of faith. Each path is unique: my faith will not always look like yours. But none of that matters until we actually have faith, until we've made the choice to start walking toward Christ. Generic Wonder is just vague spiritual-ishness, and generic Obedience is Fundamentalism. We have to choose God ourselves. This is where Evangelical Christianity has something right that we Mainline Christians far too often miss. Evangelicals stress that have to *choose* Christ, and they are right. No one can do it for us, and it doesn't happen automatically if we keep all the rules and do all the good things. We have to choose.

Don't worry: I'm not going to break into an evangelistic altar call now – asking you to step out into the aisle while the choir sings “Just As I Am” and come forward to give your heart to Jesus (counselors are standing by!). I won't do that. Partly because the choir's off for the summer, partly because we don't have any counselors standing by, but more because I actually think that the choice to follow Jesus is one that we need to make every morning and not just one-and-done at an altar call – Choose you *this day* whom you will serve – and most of all because I

think the choice is less high pressure than the usual altar call. I love the way that the Gospel of John presents Jesus calling his disciples, in the passage we read earlier. In the other gospels Jesus just comes up to people and says, "Come, follow me," but not in John. Instead, people come first to him, and they are so drawn by what they hear that they hang around. They even go bring other people to hear. Andrew brings Peter. Philip brings Nathaniel. They come to Jesus, all of them different, all with unique questions, all of them wondering who this Jesus is and if he just might be the one they're looking for. And Jesus says to them simply, "Come and see." It's an invitation that is used over and over in John.

Following Christ is not about being filled with awe, not about being right or being busy or even being good. It's not about being chosen or being in the right group. None of that changes us, and following Christ is about being changed. Before that can happen, though, we have to choose to permit it. It's up to us. But whatever path we take, if we start off with the conscious choice to walk with Christ, we will be utterly transformed. And it will be good. Trust me. No, don't trust me. Come and see.