



Sermon delivered by
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Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
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"The Choice"
(Joshua 1-3a, 14-25)

In the day of Joshua, the phrase did not exist, but he, Joshua, was using the same strategy when we use that phrase. The phrase I am thinking of has been used by me, often. It is also a phrase that has been directed to me, and rarely has the phrase ever failed to get the desired results, which prompts me to ask each of you: *Have you ever had a “come to Jesus” moment?* A “come to Jesus” moment is a moment of complete and transparent honesty. It is a moment when all the cards are laid on the table, and nothing is held back, nothing is denied. It is a moment when all parties involved are as honest as they can be. It is as if we were standing in the very presence of the risen Lord, and no one dares to be less than honest in the presence of the Lord.

Joshua convenes a “come to Jesus” moment with the tribes of Israel. On behalf of the Lord, Joshua needs to know, and needs to know beyond all doubt, that everyone is on board with the Lord, with the One God Who has risked everything to bring Israel into the Promised Land. The issue way back then was faithfulness, *relational faithfulness*. And guess what, the issue for us in our day is also faithfulness, *relational faithfulness*. I have not heard it said, but at the heart of the recent revelations of sexual harassment is faithfulness and, of course, the lack thereof. Being unfaithful to another, especially a loved one, is a huge breach of faith, and we know that, don't we? Infidelity creates a deep wound in the one who cheats and in the one who is cheated on, and the healing of such a wound can take a long time, sometimes even a lifetime. I have always found it fascinating that the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Rebekah and Isaac, of Jacob and Rachel, that the God of Jesus Christ, the God of heaven and earth, that that God **is** concerned with faithfulness. I am reminded often that the God found in Old and New Testament is a God Who has feelings like yours and mine, and there are times, moments and experiences when human actions wound those divine feelings, like last Sunday's shooting in Texas. Keep in mind: if you have ever had your feelings hurt or offended or disregarded, then you know how the Lord feels when the Lord's feelings are hurt or offended

or disregarded by the likes of you and me. I have no doubt that the Almighty possesses personal feelings because our God is a *personal* God. Allow that characteristic to keep you in touch with the fact that the God of Jesus Christ knows how it feels to be us, especially how it feels to be cheated on in a relationship.

This morning, think with me on two points found in the morning lesson from Joshua, and as we talk about these two points see if you hear a familiar voice in Israel's response to Joshua, and see if that familiar voice may very well be our voice. **First**, when Joshua convenes his "come to Jesus" moment his purpose was to let Israel know that they had gotten with nothing. Those fickle people, those complex and contradictory people had been cheating on the Lord ever since their deliverance from Pharaoh's Egypt. Think Golden Calf. All Joshua wanted to know, on behalf of the Lord, was who had ownership of Israel's heart. Was it the God of Abraham and Sarah or was it one of those gods from Israel's past? Who had ownership of Israel's heart?

A young woman made an appointment to talk. She was engaged to be married, and she had a concern. Her fiancé was still seeing and still dating other women. He and she were engaged and, yet, he was still asking women out on dates, and the young woman wanted to know if that was okay. I asked that young woman one question: *Why aren't you still dating other men?* She told me the answer I had expected: she had made a choice, her mind was made up; but evidently he was still in the process of making up his mind. I suggested that he might need a "come to Jesus" moment.

Joshua put it to Israel in the simplest of terms. He told Israel either you serve the God Who saved your neck by redeeming you from bondage or you serve those bogus gods, the gods of folklore and superstition, the gods your ancestors worshipped way back when. Joshua wanted to know, *Who will it be?* A living God or some made-up fantasy god. A God Who calls you by name or some fictional god? Mind you, that's still the choice, today. Who will it be? One Sunday earlier this fall, as I was greeting all of you at the courtyard gate, one of you felt compelled to tell me your horoscope for that Sunday. You were excited because it had something to do with unexpected fortune and your lucky number for that day was 14. Before I could respond, you made it known that during the sermon you decided to buy a lottery ticket on the way home. In the spirit of Joan Rivers, I felt like saying, *Can we talk?* But it was too late. Off you went inspired by your horoscope reading, and yet I know you to be a faithful member of Christ's church. I know you have a love for the Lord. I know that, and

yet it seems, it appears to me that you are dividing your time and your heart, and your horoscope conversation reminded me of Israel's response to Joshua's ultimatum.

Israel says to Joshua, *Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. Far be it that we would ever forsake the God Who brought us out of Egypt, Who did great and mighty deeds, and Who protected us from those pesky Amorites.* Yes, far be it from us. And yet, Israel was two-timing the Lord, and like you and me, the Lord was offended at being two-timed; the Lord was hurt by Israel's two-timing behavior. All Joshua wanted to know was, *Who will it be?* Will it be the Lord or will it be the Panthers? Will it be the Lord or will it be the beach house? Will it be the Lord or will it be the investment portfolio? Will it be the Lord or will it be us, *us*, our will prevailing over God's will? Like Israel, you and I are no less complex and contradictory. We two-time the Lord not infrequently. And yet, the choice remains, *Whom shall we serve?* And a choice needs to be made, a choice will be made, and that takes us to the **second** point of the morning.

After Israel is blue-in-the-face swearing allegiance to God, Joshua surprises Israel by saying, *You can't do it! You are going to fall flat on your face. You say you will serve the Lord, but you won't, and that will only break the Lord's heart into a thousand more pieces.* Israel knew Joshua was right. We know Joshua is still right. We may confess with our lips that we are the Lord's. We may confess we will support the church's mission and witness with a giving card, but some return to the old ways. We renege on our faithfulness. We say we will, but we don't, and when push comes to shove we deny it. *Of course, we will serve the Lord*, but the truth betrays us.

It is precisely because we are complex and contradictory people that our God has chosen to be gracious, very *gracious* towards us. Unlike the God Joshua spoke of, a God Whom if you forsook would consume you, the God Jesus speaks of is a God willing to teach us how to choose so we may remain faithful. That's why many of us obey the Lord of Jesus Christ. That's why we do not two-time the Lord. That's why we open up our lives, our hearts, our souls so the Lord may change and transform us, and all to the Lord's pleasure. We live in highly seductive times, and too often we are more willing to listen to our horoscope than we are to the living God Who raised Jesus from the dead. And, why is that? Why do we live and behave like that? Are we weak people with a weak constitution, or is it a matter of *faithfulness, relational faithfulness*, the kind of faithfulness that makes a promise and keeps that promise, a faithfulness that refuses to renege on the promise made because we know what

it will do to the very heart of a God Who gave everything, *everything* so you and I would end up owing nothing, *nothing*.

After the tribes of Israel make known their choice, Joshua puts it in writing, so to speak, so Israel would not forget that once-upon-a-time they did make a choice, and Israel chose the living God, the God Who risked everything so the Promised Land would be Israel's reality, would be Israel's *new* reality. I have heard those two words constantly since 9-11. You and I are living the new reality of terrorism, not just foreign terrorism, but homegrown terrorism, as well. Since last Sunday's shooting in Texas, I have wondered why the Lord did not jam the gunman's assault rifle and, thus, save all those lives, especially the children. But that was not meant to be. The new reality is that people were shot and they died. The new reality is that the church's mission and witness are needed now more than ever. The new reality is also this: that we choose to believe in and to follow and to obey a living God, a God against Whom evil has no power, evil is a defeated power. Since last Sunday, I have also recalled that the first heart to break last Sunday was Whose? The Lord's. The new reality is that Christ is risen, and in His resurrection is found the resurrection of those who made their choice and who chose Christ as their portion. As for you and me, as for our household, we will serve Whom? We will serve the living God, the God Who allows nothing to separate us from God's love as such love is revealed fully and faithfully and generously in Christ Jesus, the risen and reigning Lord, the One Who is gracious enough to choose us, again and again, and Who chooses us to be His church on this corner and for the sake of His victorious Kingdom.

That's what Joshua wanted for Israel, to be on the winning side. And that's what the risen Lord wants for us, to be on the winning side, to be on His side, both now and for eternity.

Let us pray: Holy God, grant us the grace to choose *You*, again and again. Inspire us to choose You when we rise in the morning and when the evening comes. By Holy Spirit, reveal to us, again and again, why choosing You is THE choice You want for us; the choice we will never come to regret. Amen.