

“A Promise for the Generations”

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Intro

This morning we dip into a piece of scripture that grants us a historical overview of where the Israelites have come from, and where, in light of that information, they should move in the days that are yet to come.

The book of Joshua itself deals with the historical time when Israel concluded its time of wandering in the wilderness and move into the land that was promised them by God. Therefore the opening chapters deal with how Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey, was conquered. The latter chapters deal with how the newly seized lands were divided up amongst the twelve tribes. The verses that we are about to hear act as a postscript to that action.

What takes place is that Joshua calls the tribes back together to the neutral city of Shechem and begins to tell them their own story, how their ancestors once lived in a distant land, and worshipped other Gods.

However, this all changed when God selected Abraham and led him on a journey that eventually led them to where the Israelites were on that day: in the land of Canaan with offspring that were so numerous that they were like “grains of sand”. Joshua asks the leaders of Israel, in light of their story, who they are going to worship from that day forward. The leaders recognize the truth that is before them and commit themselves (and the generations that are to follow) to live a life that is devoted to the Lord God.

The question that I ask you to consider in light of the covenant that was made in this passage is this: how seriously do you plan to keep the promises that you make regarding your faith, your commitment to the church, and your care for the generations that are yet to come? The scripture reads this way.

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

24 Then Joshua gathered 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. ² And Joshua said to all the people, “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. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

¹⁴ “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. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ 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. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!”

²² Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

“A Promise for the Generations”

The last few Sundays, after the worship service is held, I venture down to the end of Fellowship Hall for the Confirmation Class that I lead with a few of our young adults who are trying to figure out what they believe in regards to God, and whether or not church membership is something that they want to take part in. Once we get through the opening questions and a review of the previous weeks activity we started to talk about the questions for that day. One of those questions that has shown up in a couple of different ways is, “how do you know that God is real in your life?” The text that we use gave answers that ranged from the creation, its intricacies, and its wonder, to the Word of God, to personal experience. All of these areas are ways that we can come to know God as real in our lives.

However, another response that came from one of the kids was because their parents taught them that God was real. As I thought about that answer, I was reminded what a special privilege it is that the faith that we are able to live out together with each other is something that is able to be passed on.

This fact is able to manifest itself in a couple of ways in the scripture passage this morning.

To begin with, we are able to hear how the Israelite relationship with God did not simply begin with the people who crossed into the land of Canaan. It started some 500 years before, with Abraham. The relationship that God developed with Abraham was then shared by Abraham with his son Isaac who then shared that connection with his children Esau and Jacob. This pattern of parents (both genetically and societal linked) sharing their connection with God continued down through the generations from Jacob to Joseph, to Moses, to Joshua. The leaders who were standing at Shechem were just the latest in a long line of faith; a faith that was shared. All along the way, God was there reminding the subsequent generations that their ancestors weren’t crazy, that the Almighty was there with them, leading, critiquing, and supporting them in all of the days that were yet to come. The covenant that is made in the passage is a reaffirmation of the promises that were made all the way back with Abraham.

The second way that this passage shows that one generation is able to pass on their faith with the age groups that are yet to come is that the Old Testament does not end after the individuals who agreed to the covenant with Joshua died. The faith that they reaffirmed was passed on to their children, and their children’s children, all the way to the days of Jesus and the early church, all the way from the early church to the church of yesterday, to all of us who are here today. Our worship today is a reaffirmation that the faith that was alive in the days of Joshua, the connection to God that was exhibited in the covenant that was made at Shechem is a connection that is still lived out in the church today. God made a promise to the people, and those people, collective in their reply, said that they would follow this God, which would thereby allow that God to be known by the generations that were to come.

This last assertion that the connection to God that was exhibited in the communal and generational covenant that was made at Shechem, is a connection that is still lived out in the church today is something that may seem a little hard to believe. This is especially so when one of the prevalent strains of Christian thought is the focus of having “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ”. You watch the televangelists and the majority of them are preaching a message that is about you and you alone: “are you saved?”, “have you accepted Jesus?”, “have you confessed that Jesus Christ is your Lord?”

However, that is not the message that we pick up in the passage. What we hear there is that the fruit of a promise that was made so long ago with Abraham, can be lived out, not only in the here and now, but in the years and generations that are yet to come.

This reality is lived out in the Reformed Church through the promises that we make with each other, and the promises that we make before God.

For example, the new member liturgy has new members stating that they would “promise to accept the spiritual guidance of the Church, obeying its doctrines and its teaching, and to walk in the spirit of Christian love *with the congregation*, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.” The congregation then responds that we “would welcome these brothers and sisters into the community of faith as communicant members and pledge to them love, prayers, and encouragement as they *live the Christian life together*.” In both cases, we are able to see individuals subjugating that individuality in order that we might be able to walk together on this journey of faith.

In the Reformed variation of the Christian faith, it isn’t about me and God; it’s about all of us coming together to lift our praise to the Almighty, and work as one so that the work of the kingdom of God might be done. This communal sense of promise and faith is then passed on to the generations to come.

We also hear that in the baptismal liturgy as not only are the caregivers intending their child “to be a disciple, to follow God’s way, and to show God’s love” but then the congregation is asked to “welcome this new disciple into the household of God; to share with him the good news of the gospel; and pray for and work toward the well-being of children everywhere?”. Yes, the parents make a promise to their child and their God. And then the congregation promises before God to the individual who is baptized as well as individuals of the next generation everywhere.

Once we make these promises we then have to go out and do all that we can for those of the next generation, following the leading of the Holy Spirit, so that our children might be able to know this faith that has been passed to us from previous generations. Our faith is not something that we hoard as if it will run out. It is something that we share. Our faith is God’s gift given through us to the generations that are to come. And we need to share it...live it. The murders in Las Vegas, someone using a truck to kill people on a bike path in New York (and all throughout Europe for that matter), and then the senseless slaughter off so many in a church down in Texas: the voices off the world are calling people, and where they are calling them has nothing to do with the Almighty. We need to declare the truth and reality off God and do so today...ffor our children and the generations that are to come.

Just as it was in the days of Joshua, it is amazing to think about how powerful God can be so as to work through us, to bring us together as the church, so as to share the gift of faith with the generations yet to come. Our kids are heir to that promise and as I look back on how true God has been to His word, I have no doubts that one day, in God’s time, they will be passing on that gift to their children. As parents of

children (whether in the particular or the communal sense) we have an obligation to share the faith that we have been blessed with.

As people of faith, we have obligations and we need to take them seriously. If we do, then the gift of faith that we have been blessed with will be there for generations to come.

After Sermon Prayer

O holy Lord, we are able to see in the passage this morning that the gift of faith is something that is handed down through the generations and that a promise made so long ago is able to be fulfilled not only in the here and now, but most certainly in the days that are yet to come. We pray that we might be able to pass on the gift of faith that was first given to us. Help us to know that together, we have the opportunity to show Your love and glory to the generation that is next to come. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.