

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Joshua is the sixth book of the Old Testament and the first of the Former Prophets the historical books, which conclude with Nehemiah. The book tells of Israel's conquest of many other groups under Joshua after the death of Moses (chaps. 1-12) and Joshua's subsequent distribution of the land among the tribes of Israel (chaps. 13-19). Like most stories of battles, there are parts that are difficult to read and many have felt that the nationalistic God of battles whose power is seen in executing Holy War seems quite distant from the God of Jesus. Other books such as Judges lead us to think that the conquest of Palestine may not have been as swift and decisive as the Book of Joshua makes it appear. In the final chapter toward the end of his life Joshua delivers his final speech to the people, reminding them of their historical roots and challenging the tribes to commit themselves to God alone (chap. 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. **I gave** him Isaac; ⁴ and to Isaac **I gave** Jacob and Esau. **I gave** Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ Then **I sent** Moses and Aaron, and **I plagued** Egypt with what **I did** in its midst; and afterwards **I brought** you out. ⁶ When **I brought** your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.^a ⁷ When they cried out to the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw **what I did** to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. ⁸ Then **I brought** you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and **I handed** them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and **I destroyed** them before you. ⁹ Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but **I would not listen** to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so **I rescued you** out of his hand. ¹¹ When you went over the

a Or *Sea of Reeds*

Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and **I handed them over** to you. ¹² **I sent** the hornet^b ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; 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 oliveyards that you did not plant.

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.**”¹

Today is a good day to talk about the power of commitment since there is such an excellent illustration of commitment rolling by the church. Today more than 4,300 bicyclists are enduring pain, discomfort, and inconvenience as they ride past BBC during their two day, 192 mile journey from Sturbridge to Provincetown as part of the Pan-Mass Challenge which generates nearly half of the Jimmy Fund’s annual budget as it seeks to find a cure for cancer and to help those dealing with the disease. Many of the riders and the volunteers are taking part because they or someone they love has been touched by cancer and because of their experience they are highly committed to do the hard, time consuming work of training and fund raising in order to participate. An article by Billy Starr, the founder and executive director of the Pan-Massachusetts Challenge, said in part, *“It helps them understand that we are all – by choice or default – a part of a larger community.”*

In today’s scripture from Joshua 24, Joshua is seeking to convey to the people that they are all part of a larger community, a community of faith, and being part of the community of faith requires commitment. That commitment, like riding in the Pan-Mass

^b Meaning of Heb uncertain

¹*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville

Challenge, may involve enduring some pain, discomfort, inconvenience, and even suffering.

Joshua's call for commitment makes it clear that the people have a choice about which god they will worship and serve. The choices are three: "*the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River,*" *the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living,* the third choice is to serve the Lord who has done so much for them.

These three choices represent a choice between remaining stuck in the familiarity of the past, accommodating to the present or choosing to serve the Lord who has blessed us beyond measure. Hundreds of years have past since Abraham left the land beyond the Euphrates River so the fact that there were some people who were still worshipping the gods of that area means that they had been passing on the way they had always done it, for generations. It is not easy to give up something that connects us to our family and our past yet Joshua says there comes a time to choose. Some of us find it hard to let go of yesterday in order to embrace tomorrow – we'd like to have both. Joshua says, sometimes we can't have both, we have to choose.

Joshua also knows that some people will be tempted to worship the local gods, (when in Amor, do as the Amorites). It often seems it is easier to go along to get along, after all if we're going to live among people, trade with them, do business with them; it might help if we had some common ground. Joshua says we have to choose the familiarity of the past, accommodating the present, or to serve the Lord. In his speech the personal pronoun "I" is used about **18 times** to describe what God has done for the people.

The point Joshua is making is clearly – the gods beyond the Euphrates have done nothing for you, the gods the Amorites worship have done nothing for you, never forget all the Lord has done – count your many blessings as the old hymn says and make a commitment.

When we turn from Joshua to the New Testament it is clear: answering Jesus' call to follow him is a powerful commitment that lasts for the rest of our life. Being a disciple of Jesus is not one component of our life; along with family and relationships, work, education, service and leisure. Committing our selves to following Jesus is the defining, shaping force that influences how we act in our relationships, how we carry out our work (maybe even what kind of work we do), how we seek to learn and grow, and how we invest our time.

Following Jesus is the greatest, most transforming, most rewarding commitment anyone can make. If we are engaged in real discipleship, even major decisions such as where to go to college, whom to marry, and what to do with our life, will not have the impact on our future of following Jesus.

When we choose to commit our selves to following Jesus, we truly do not know where Jesus will lead us or what experiences we may have.

Jesus doesn't say to Simon and Andrew, *"If you feel like following me, you may."*

He doesn't say, *"Take a pamphlet, read it, consider it, and get back to me."*

Jesus doesn't invite them to be disciples on a trial basis where they can follow him for the first month for free, and if they like discipleship, they can for a donation, be disciples one month at a time with the option to cancel anytime.

Jesus uses an imperative, *"Come, follow me."* And the fishermen had a choice to make. Only Jesus knows what decisions and partings will be demanded of us, what nets and people we may have to leave behind like the first disciples. What we know is that the person we are following is trustworthy and that he will lead us on the right road.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

"Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it.

*His commands never seek to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it."*²

Before we decide to answer the call of Christ, and commit our lives to him, we may think about what it will cost us and what we have to give up. Author Dallas Willard tells us what it will cost us and what we will miss if we refuse Jesus' invitation to follow him.

*"Nondiscipleship costs abiding **peace**, a life penetrated throughout by **love**, **faith** that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good **hopefulness** that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, **power** to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly the **abundance of life** Jesus said he came to bring."*

Jesus wants us to be totally committed to following him, working with him and for him, and struggling onward no matter how difficult the challenge may be. Jesus only wants followers who trust him enough to say, **"I won't stay in the comfort of what's familiar, I won't just accommodate to the trends around me. You are my leader; I trust you and will follow you in my relationships, in whatever cross you have**

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 40.

shaped and chosen for me to carry, and in surrendering all that I have and all that I am to you and to your service.”

There comes a time when a commitment must be made. Once there was a war between the animals and the birds. Bat was on birds' side. In the first battle the birds were badly beaten. As soon Bat saw that the battle was going against them, he crept away, hid under a log, and stayed there until the fight was over.

When the animals were going home, Bat slipped in among them. After they had gone some distance, they saw him and asked one another: *“How is this? Bat is one of those fought against us!”*

Bat heard them and said: *“Oh, no! I am one of you; I don't belong to the birds. Did you ever see a bird with double teeth? Go and look in their mouths and see if they have. If you find one bird with double teeth, you can say that I belong to the birds. But I don't; I am one of your own people.”*

They didn't say anything more; they let Bat stay with them.

Soon after, there was another battle; in that battle the birds won. As Bat's side was being beaten, he slipped away and hid under a log. When the battle was over and the birds were going home, Bat went in among them. When they noticed him, they said: *“You are our enemy; we saw you fighting against us.”*

“Oh, no,” said Bat, *“I am one of you; I don't belong to those animals. Did you ever see one of them who had wings?”*

They didn't say anything more; they let him stay with them.

So Bat went back and forth as long as the war lasted. At the end of the war, the birds and animals held a council to decide what to do with Bat. At last they said to Bat:

“Hereafter, you will fly around alone at night, and will never have any friends, either among those that fly, or those that walk.” The Bat failed to understand the power of making a commitment.

German poet, novelist, and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) expresses in a memorable way the power of making a commitment. **“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.** Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: **that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.** All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues

from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. **Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now**".

Joshua exhorted the people to choose to serve the Lord.
Jesus walked by the sea and called fishermen to make a commitment.
Jesus wants people who are not ashamed to say, *"As for me and my house with all that we have, we will serve the Lord we trust and to whom belong."*

Blessing:

Go now as God's servants choosing to love and serve the Lord.

Remember God's presence often and draw strength from the knowledge that the One who calls and invites also strengthens and sustains.

May God give us joy as we follow Jesus on the adventure of discipleship.