

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 16, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"CHOOSE THIS DAY"

Joshua 24:14,15

I have a good feeling after voting on election day. Sometimes the person I vote for wins; sometimes not, but I always feel empowered when I've made my choice and cast my ballot. Democracy is not perfect, but it's the form of government which best fits our human nature. For God has made us in his image as those who are able to reason and make choices. Now things happen in life which are thrust upon us rather than chosen by us. But in much of life we can and do make choices; some of our choices are good; some not so good. But we have some control. We have choices. We go to a store and choose this pair of shoes over that pair; when we get married we choose a spouse promising to forsake all others and to love and cherish and be faithful to that one alone; you have chosen to be here today rather than somewhere else.

In today's reading from Joshua chapter 24 it was election day in Israel. But the people were not being asked to choose a political leader; they were asked to choose which God they would serve. It was a most important choice. Joshua had led the people into the promised land, fought against their enemies and now the people were settling into this new land. Joshua gathered the tribes of Israel to a great ceremony of commitment. He said to them, "Revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness..." And if they were unwilling to serve the Lord, Joshua told them that they should "choose this day whom you will serve, the gods their ancient ancestors served or the gods of the surrounding peoples..." Then Joshua led by example, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Joshua reminded the people of all that the Lord had done for them, as their Redeemer and Protector, how he fought on their side and fulfilled his promise. They said, "Therefore we will also serve the Lord; for he is our God." Joshua warned them, "Don't say this lightly, for the Lord is a holy God, a jealous god; if you make this promise and then forsake Him, he will not forgive your sins; he will turn and do you harm and consume you after having done you good." Twice more the people made their choice, "The Lord God we will serve and him we will obey."

Now we are faced with a similar choice. Which god will we trust and serve? To put Joshua's words in our context, "Choose this day whom you will serve. Will you serve the false gods and lesser idols of our culture, or will you serve

the true and living God?"

The first point I want to make is this: **Choosing to serve and trust the living God is always the right choice.**

Some people say they don't believe in God. But everyone has a god they believe in. Everyone has something or someone which is ultimate for them. It's not a question of God or no god, but which god do you serve? You see, we can choose to serve the god of money or power or the gods of comfort or security or power or popularity. Now these things have their place, but they won't satisfy us or fill the God-shaped space within us. God is a jealous god, not for his sake, but for our sake. He knows that when we forsake him and chase after lesser gods we will be let down by them in the end.

Joshua said, "God will not forgive your transgressions and your sins. 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." But we now know the true and living God through Jesus Christ. So we know that it's not God who will turn and do us harm and consume us. No, it's the false gods who turn and consume us. We serve them, and find there is no grace or mercy in them. How many people have given their lives to a company or some cause, then suddenly told one day to clear out their desk. Or we serve wealth and discovers that it can be quickly diminished in a stock market melt-down, or that more and more never is never enough. Or you can serve the god of popularity, but before long someone else comes along and takes your place. And all your little gods mean nothing when the doctor gently tells you that you have potentially life-ending disease. The gods of this world cannot help us in the time of death and judgement. No god of this world will stand beside us with mercy and hope on that day. We serve the little gods and false idols of this world and find that they consume us and leave us empty.

But we can choose to serve the true and living Lord God. He is our Father, our Redeemer, our Protector, the One who indeed forgives our sins through the shed blood of his Son; the One who stands by us when all others forsake us; the one who works for our good; the God who gave his only Son so that by faith in Him you and I can have eternal life; the God whose ways are righteous and good and given for our blessing. Choosing to serve and trust the living God is not the easiest or the most popular choice. But it's always the right choice; it's the best choice. It is always right to choose the true and living God.

And you know what - it makes a difference in family life. I saw a study recently which said that the best predictor as to whether teenagers will stay

away from drugs is that they have been raised in the church. You want your kids to stay away from drugs? Bring them to church, involve them in the life of the church. Did you see that story recently about the big one hundred- plus-year-old oak tree on a Toronto school ground. Over the years it had withstood lightning strikes and fierce windstorms. Thousands of kids had made friendships and played in its shade. But finally it had to be cut down, because tiny beetles had bored under the bark, and eaten away its core. It was hollow inside. Do you want to keep destructive beetles out of your home? Do you want your family life, and your own life to be strong at the core? Choose to serve and worship the living God.

I know that church attendance is impossible every Sunday for most of us. We're faced with many choices on any given Sunday morning. But I have a challenge for all of you. Just once in the next year, I challenge you to say, "Going to worship today is more important than this other thing we could choose to do - this sports event, or this party, or this trip to the zoo." Don't just come to church when there's nothing else to do. At least once choose God over that other enticing thing that beckons you. It is a great example when parents say, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." It is a great witness when children know that worshipping and serving God and praying and reading the Bible are important to their parents. "Choose this day whom you will serve."

And it really is an every day choice. Yes, there needs to be the decisive moment when we open our hearts to Christ and make that first saving decision. And if you've never done that, I hope and pray that you will. But even for committed Christians it is still a choice that we must make everyday. It's not the choice of being saved or not saved - that was settled when you received Christ as your Saviour. But everyday as our feet hit the floor, we must choose how we will live and whom we will serve, "Choose this day whom you will serve - the false gods and idols of this world or the true and living God."

Point two. **We can choose God because he has chosen us first.**

God chose the Hebrews and acted on their behalf, not because they deserved or earned his favour; but out of love and mercy. He wanted them to be his special people in the world, obedient to Him, serving him, a light to the nations. He offered to be their God and they his people. Now they could accept or reject this relationship, but they had the choice because he had chosen them first.

It's the same with us. God chooses us and offers us a relationship with himself not because we've earned his favour, but because he loves us and is gracious to us. Now he doesn't force us to choose Him but if we reject God, we

reject all the promises and the blessings of that relationship. To reject God will lead to eternal separation and regret, if we persist in that choice. Of course, choosing to serve and trust the living God is the way of wisdom. But God gives us that choice. And the fact that we have a choice is because God has first chosen us for a relationship with himself. That's signified in the act of infant baptism. In baptism God says to these children, "I know you by name and I love you. I knew you were coming into the world, so long ago I sent my only Son to save you. I choose you to have a relationship with me. I choose you now and keep you in my care. And when you become old enough you must choose to trust me and serve me and put your faith in my Son. That's how our relationship will really develop and be fulfilled." We can choose God because God has first chosen us.

I read the story of a woman telling about renewing her relationship with her father. "When I was a child," she wrote, "my dad and I were very close." At family reunions, after the big meal, they'd crank up the stereo, and start playing polka records -- one after another. Eventually, someone would put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' It was our special song. And my father would come over with outstretched hand and say, 'Come on, girl, let's roll them blues away!' And we'd dance -- my father and I -- we'd dance.

"As a teenager, however, I started to despise the silliness of those family get-togethers. I remember once when, for reasons known only to adolescents, I sat moping on the sofa in one of those don't-associate-with-anybody moods. As 'Beer Barrel Polka' began to play, my father came over with outstretched hand. But I glared at him with icy indifference. 'Just leave me alone,' I muttered under my breath. Startled, he turned, and never asked again.. He danced with my mother, with my sisters, but not with me.

"I'd come home late and he'd be waiting for me in the old chair - wearing a bathrobe, a book open in his lap, half asleep. "What are you doing up? Why aren't you in bed?" I'd say. He'd look at me with sad, pleading eyes and say, 'I was just waiting for you, that's all. I was just waiting for you.'

"I was glad to leave that house after high school. My father and I had a distant, formal relationship. But eventually I began to miss what we had once enjoyed - only I wasn't quite sure how to bridge the gap. Then one day, when I was home for a family reunion, somebody put on the 'Beer Barrel Polka.' As my father walked across the room, I went up to him with outstretched hand and said, 'Daddy, I believe this is our dance.' He looked at me and smiled, 'I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting for you.'"

The door is open. The music is playing. God loves you. He is ready to

welcome you if you've been away for a while. He invites you to put all of your trust in Him and in His Son and to receive His refreshing, renewing Holy Spirit. "Choose this day whom you will serve..." May your answer be the same as Joshua's and mine, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

