Joshua 24:1-5, 14-15
Stewardship Commitment Sunday
November 10, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

If you could be 17 again, would you do things differently? If all of a sudden, you found yourself again at age 17, as horrifying as that sounds, would you make different choices? I've told many of you before that when I went off to college that I did so with the intention of being a pre-med major and going to medical school. That didn't last very long and I've never regretted dropping the pre-med. I switched my major to Religion and philosophy because I loved the study of the scripture and I liked the debate of ideas that happened in philosophy. I also had discovered that I liked working in a church and had it in my mind that I would go to seminary once I had my bachelor's degree in hand. So I spent the next years in college taking New Testament and Symbolic Logic and Readings in Existentialism and two wonderful years sitting through Greek Grammar so I wouldn't have to take it once I got to seminary. But I found myself in my senior year of college with an elective to fill. I could take anything I wanted since I had already fulfilled the requirements for my degree program. What should I take? My best friend in college, Steve, was also heading to seminary, but was an English major. He was going to take a class in Modern World Literature and convinced me to take it with him. It turns out that English majors spend their time reading books and talking about them. I couldn't believe it. We read four or five novels that spring and had some lively discussions and I remember saying that if I hadn't been planning on going to seminary that I would have thought seriously about majoring in English, after all it wasn't like Greek, I already spoke that language. And I remember Steve saying to me, "You know you can major in anything and still go to seminary. You don't have to be a religion major." Oh. Now I am glad that I chose to get a degree in religion and philosophy. I think. But I wonder if I had to do it over, whether I would have chosen to major in English. But I couldn't do both. So many times the choices we make preclude us making other choices. I remember as a kid that Dad would take us to Baskin-Robbins for ice cream. Raspberry ripple was almost always my choice. But in choosing that, it

meant that I didn't get Rocky Road. If you make one choice you don't get to have them all. So it is with our lives. We make choices and by doing so it means that we don't go down another road, for better or worse.

The people of Israel had been led by Moses through the wilderness years after leaving Egypt. After many years they came to the promised land and then Moses died. Joshua took over and led them through the years of conquest and they took possession of the land. And then Joshua has them come to Shechem. This was an important spot in the land of Israel. This was where Abraham and Sarah had first come to in this land and was where God had spoken to them promising them a family and a home. This was where Jacob and his sons had settled when they returned to the promised land after being in the house of Laban for twenty years. And it was here that Joshua called the leaders of the people to meet with him now that they were safe in the land. He called them together because it was time to choose. It is time to choose whom you will serve, he told the people. We came from the land beyond the river, pointing to the north east beyond Syria, beyond the great Euphrates River. And then we sojourned for four hundred years in the Land of Egypt, pointing now to the south west. And then we came to this land of Canaan. And all those lands had their gods. So should we serve the gods that our ancient forefathers and foremothers knew in the great valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates? Or should we serve the gods that we knew in Egypt laboring by the word of Pharaoh in the shadow of the pyramids? Or should we serve the gods of the land that we live in now, the gods of the Canaanites? Choose this day whom you will serve. Or should we serve the God who has been with us all along that long journey, shall we serve the Lord?

Now it may seem to you that this is an easy question. But it's not as easy as it seems. This is a point in the history of Israel, and in fact most of the world, when they did not believe in what we would call monotheism, the belief that there is only one God. They believed that each nation, each group, each land, had its own gods. Pick one. Pick one to serve. That was an open question. When Moses gave the people the Ten Commandments a few years before this, what was the first command of them all?

Moses tells them "You shall have no other gods except me." He doesn't say "there are no other gods." He says that there should be no other gods for you. There are plenty of other gods around. And Joshua reminds them that they have to choose. They have to make a choice of which god to follow.

So do we. Because there are plenty of gods out there who are demanding our loyalty, our worship. Now they may not be the gods of Egypt or the gods of the Mesopotamians or the gods of the Canaanites any more, but they are no less seductive. As yourself to complete the sentence, "There is nothing more important than . . ." What goes in the blank? There is nothing more important than money. There is nothing more important than success. There is nothing more important than pleasure. No? You can see that those as ends in themselves are things that will not satisfy our souls and become a trap. Joshua would say that those are the gods of the fleshpots of Egypt. But what about this—there is nothing more important than tradition? There is nothing more important than patriotism. There is nothing more important than holding up our values. Are those more tempting? Those are still other gods, the gods our ancestors worshiped beyond the river. But what about this—there is nothing more important than family. There is nothing more important than community. There is nothing more important than self-fulfillment. Are those gods as well? Are those the gods whose land we dwell in right now? None of those are bad things—community or family or self, or even tradition or values or patriotism or even success or money. But they are not gods. In fact, they may be the results of our faithfulness to the one true God. So choose, says Joshua. Whom will you serve?

And you don't only choose once. The people of Israel chose to follow God when they were in the wilderness. They chose to follow God when they crossed the Jordan instead of striking out on their own. And here they are choosing again. And so are we. We renew our choice every year. The same things happen in the other covenants that we make. We don't just choose once to get married. We make that commitment and then we remake it constantly over the life of our marriage.

Today we make a commitment to God, and to this community of faith. Is this about money? Is this about our budget for the next year? Yes, but those are only the results of our faithfulness. Choose this

day whom you will serve. There is nothing more important than putting God on the throne of your heart. Everything else that we are flows from that. Our caring for each other, our growth as disciples, our concern for the poor and the hungry, our commitment to care for God's creation, our passion for justice and peace, our devotion to the scriptures, every time we gather for worship, whether it be Sunday morning or Christmas eve or for a Christian wedding or for a service of witness to the resurrection, we do it all because our first devotion is to the God who loves us and who sent Christ to save us and whom we choose to serve each day.

Choose this day whom you will serve. Today.