

August 26, 2018  
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Good-morning,

When I began looking at the lectionary readings for this Sunday, I was intrigued by the pairing of the Joshua text from chapter 24 and the reading from Ephesians chapter 6. Both hold a clear command to action, to an active participation in christian life. The message from Joshua is delivered from an army general, and asks for loyalty. The Ephesians text is written from a prisoner, and is a cry for solidarity in the daily act of what it means to follow God. This is a pretty powerful pairing.

In Joshua's address to the Israelites, the listener is called to reflect on the nature of loyalty. In a setting where Joshua has been given a role of high power he stands in front of the Israelites to challenge their prevailing notion of faithfulness, not to himself but to God.

He reflects on their roots as a nation, the history of their people that continues to influence the daily lives and traditions of the Israelites, saying **“Revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.”** These ‘other gods’ are clearly linked to the idols and previous religious practices that dominated the land before God revealed themselves to Abraham. And the journey of the Israelites since then has been the slow work of relearning what it means to cultivate a life around faithfulness to YHWH. It is an undoing of the deeply ingrained patterns of life that were passed down from generation to generation.

This verse brings with it a strong challenge of self-reflection. I think that there have always been idols that creep into our daily lives, and this experience would be true for the Israelites, for my ancestors, and for myself. So, what does it mean for me to throw away the gods of my ancestors, in order that I can more fully serve my God. My ancestors were settlers, that participated in the colonization of North America. They inherited and perpetuated a culture of separation from those who were different and gross mistreatment of people who were social ‘others.’ What I've inherited is a life of privilege that is filled with benefits from the oppression of

other people and now, in this verse I believe that I'm challenged, to make a choice, to give this up.

The english translation calls us to **“serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness.”** but the hebrew phrase actually contains the meaning **“serve God with integrity and in faithfulness.”** I think this difference is significant. The call to integrity reminds me that it is my responsibility to do the work required to undo the patterns in my life that do not reflect the heart of God. That do not allow my faith to go all the way down. That it is my job to look at my roots, and to be honest about what I need to let go of and adjust in order to live out my faith with integrity.

Now this kind of feat sounds completely overwhelming, and impossible. I think an immediate reaction when looking at the complexity of that work is to simply shut that door to the past and ignore the way it might seep into my life today. But then verse 15 hits me with this **“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 already living.”** There is no such thing as neutral in the act of faithfulness. Whether its the idols of the past or the present, they are actively a part of this world creeping into the values that I inherit and the choices that I make. If I refuse to actively throw off the other gods/idols in my life then the least that I can do is face my choice honestly. Who or what is it that I'm going to serve?

And with that sobering realization I join in with the crowd of Israelites **“far be it from me to forsake the Lord to serve other gods.”** I too wish to commit my household to serve God. So then I'm right back to being overwhelmed by the immensity of that task.

And here is where we turn to Ephesians. This text does not diminish the amount of work before us, verse 12 states that **“our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”** There is incredible pain, and brokenness, and evil that exist in this world. I'm sure you all have something coming to mind. And in our commitment to serve God, we are not only entering into the work of throwing off out personal idols, but wading into the work of overthrowing the very existence of these evil forces. This struggle is real, and dangerous, and there is a clear urgency

in the text. It's author is writing this message from an imprisonment that they are facing because of this very fight.

It is clearly too big a task for me or any other bumbling human, but I've already pledged my loyalty, so what now. How does this image transform from a story of impending doom & failure to the proclamation of the "Good News."

Well, we start out.

We trust that we have been gifted with enough to begin, and enough to go on.

We get up, and we get dressed.

**"Therefore take out the whole armour of God."**

This is the image that is given to encourage Christians in all the tasks that are required of them. The armed soldier, mirrors the call in Joshua given from the stance of a general. Instead of a soldier participating in a battle of flesh and blood it is transformed into the image of a secure believer. We are provided with everything we need to enter into each day and begin the work of integrity and faithfulness.

We start out by putting on our **belt of truth**. Letting go of any pretence or false image and simply living out of a place of honesty. This belt allows us to be free from the grasp of shame, indecency, or exposure. So we put on our belt and live out of the things we know to be true. That our Great Redeemer is more powerful than any other force we might encounter.

Next we slip on a **breastplate**. Protecting our heart is **righteousness**, all our passions and our life source can be protected and held in a love for justice & goodness. By slipping on this gift from God, our blood will continue pumping and we will not grow faint but will be sustained.

I don't know if we are suppose to pick favourites but the **shoes** we are given in this passage are a pretty incredible gift. Keeping the amor imagery, military shoes need to sustain their wearer as they set out on the long and challenging road that awaits them. And we are told that for our shoes, we are to **"put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."** The particulars are left up to us. I believe that our endurance in this service is built on a foundation of self-care that enables us to be in this for the long haul. It is remembering to put in our lives the support that we need in order to continue proclaiming the gospel of peace,

whatever this might be for us. This is a life long journey, and it is crucial to have a good pair of shoes if we want to keep walking in our Rabbi's footsteps.

Then we get to take a **shield of faith**. The word for shield here is a full length shield, that protects the whole body. Here we are given assurance that in committing to a life of faithfulness, we receive the very protection that we need to stay safe from the evil we are confronting. We are safe. In the face of everything. We are safe.

Now we remember to slip on our **helmet**. This is often our go to piece of protection, whether in the image of battle or on a bike. We put on a helmet to protect our life. So of course here we have a helmet of **salvation**. What a beautiful reminder that our lives are no longer in danger. Through Jesus we have been gifted salvation and all we need to do is to accept this gift. So we put on our helmet.

And finally before heading out we take up a **sword**. This is the only item so far that is specifically offensive in nature. The sword we take up is "**the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.**" Now this is truly significant. Commentators caution against diminishing this sword to the words of scripture, and they urge us to take the 'word of God' to its full meaning. This phrase mirrors the opening of the Gospel of John, which tells the story of how the "**Word was God**" and the way the "**Word became flesh among us.**" The Sword that we take up reminds us that we are not the warriors in this battle. The offence that we are gifted is the Spirit, the Living Word, Jesus, that is to say God.

Too often we see ourselves as the true 'doers' in God's work. The apostle reminds us that it is through no ability of our own, but by God's own power that we can enter into the battle with evil, the undoing of systematic oppression, and the many idols we endeavour to throw off. This text calls us to suit up by the grace of God, for the purpose of steadfastness.

The battle is already won, and yet there are still many hostile powers that govern our present age. In committing to a life of integrity and faithfulness we can expect to enter the arena against all the personal and social forces that resist God's transformation. But we are not alone, we have more than we need to begin with. And as our final act of preparation, we pray. For ourselves, for each other, and for this world. Amen.