Sermon
November 8, 2026

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Sermon – Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 27)

Scripture Texts: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: ***"Choose this day whom you will serve."*** *In both times of prosperity and times of adversity, we are called to decide who we will follow and serve: the gods of greed and violence, or the God of love and grace embodied by Jesus.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Do we serve a god of fear?
    a. How many of you are familiar with the *Left Behind* books?
        i. They were being published when I was a teenager, and I got captivated by them.
        ii. They tell a story of the end of the world, when all of the faithful Christians have been taken to heaven in "the rapture" and the rest of the world is left to face God's wrath.
        iii. It is captivating material for a teenage boy! But it also presents a God of whom we need to be afraid!
    b. Lots of problems with rapture theology.
        i. No historical basis – this theology originated in 1830's…our church is older than it!
        ii. It arose from a misreading of today's passage from Thessalonians, when we "will be caught up in the clouds" to meet Jesus.
        iii. But, the language being used here for the return of Jesus is that used for the coming of a Roman governor to a Roman city. And, while the city would go out to meet the governor, it wasn't to leave the city behind. Instead, it was to welcome in the rightful ruler.
        iv. Proper Christian theology does not reject creation, but looks forward to Jesus coming again to unite heaven and earth, bringing to completion God's work of redemption and healing.
    c. Choose this day whom you will serve!
        i. We've got a choice, here, about what kind of god we serve and follow. Is it the god of the rapture – god of judgment and vengeance and fear and wrath?
        ii. Or, is it something different? Someone better?
2. The same choice is presented by Joshua
    a. Context
        i. We've skipped over almost the whole book of Joshua in the past week. Last week, he was the newly appointed successor of Moses, leading the people of Israel out of the desert and into the Promised Land.
        ii. This week, Joshua is nearing the end of his life; he is considering his legacy and sharing his final words with the people of Israel.

iii. In between these two weeks, the book of Joshua is full of military and political intrigue, as the people conquer their enemies and divide up the land, establishing a new nation.

b. Challenge of prosperity
   i. A straightforward reading of this passage recognizes that prosperity can be a challenge to faithfulness.
   ii. When the people were in Egypt, they called out to God for help, for deliverance. When they were in the desert, they had to rely on God for survival.
   iii. But now that they have their own land, Joshua recognizes it would be easy for them to stray from God, to trust in their own achievements, to chase after other gods. So, he is seeking for them to commit, here and now, to continue worshipping and serving the God who brought them out of Egypt, the God of their ancestors (it is significant that this is set at Shechem, which is where God made a covenant with Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12!).

c. Which God is Joshua offering?
   i. The problem with this straightforward reading is that the god Joshua offers to the people seems a lot like the god of the rapture. This is a god who is jealous, and who threatens to consume the people if they turn to foreign gods.
   ii. Moreover, this god led the people on a campaign of violent conquest. The people have returned to the land of their ancestors, a land that God had promised to them – but it was not an empty land! Instead, they fought and killed to possess the land. And, to make matters worse, God seemingly commanded them not only to defeat their enemies, but to wipe them out, man, woman, and child.
   iii. Joshua calls the people to choose whom they will serve, but is this a god that we actually want to serve?

d. God is like Jesus
   i. To be honest, I have spent years struggling with the book of Joshua, and the god who seems to be presented here. This does not seem to be consistent with the God of love and mercy revealed in Jesus. So much of my own faith journey has been coming to trust that God is like Jesus, and that God's intent for this world is healing and redemption, rather than wrath and destruction.
   ii. In studying the book of Joshua, it has been helpful for me to learn that the divinely commanded violence and genocide was not uncommon in the religious and political landscape of the time. When we look at other ancient texts from that period and that part of the world, we regularly see gods calling for bloodshed and violence, and we see people exaggerating their military victories to claim legitimacy for their cause and their nation. People wrote and spoke about their gods in ways that supported their claims to greatness and dominance – and this is likely just as true of Joshua as any of the other ancient texts.
   iii. So, we have a choice - choose this day whom you will serve: the wrathful and violent god portrayed by Joshua, or the God of love and mercy revealed in Jesus. We can read scripture either way, and whichever one of these you take as your starting point will shape how you read the other. It is possible to take the god of Joshua as your starting point and read Jesus in that light – so that Jesus is all about saving a chosen few from the sinful ways of a world that is doomed to destruction. But is this a god that you want to worship and serve? I hope not.

iv. If, instead, we make Jesus the foundation of our faith, then we read Joshua as a reminder of how quick humans are to try and use God to justify our own violent impulses, or to make ourselves and our nation greater than all others. This is an important, and timely, reminder!

3. The stakes of this choice
    a. Choose this day whom you will serve: the God of Joshua or the God of Jesus. In the Hebrew, Joshua and Jesus actually share the same name – Yeshua. But, they offer us strikingly different visions of God.
    b. The choice matters greatly, and it is urgent. (I think this urgency is part of what Jesus is trying to convey in the complex parable in today's gospel – but we don't have time to fully explore that parable here; please follow up with me if you'd like to discuss if further!)
        i. Our world is full of would-be Joshuas, trying to use fear and violence and religion to make themselves great. But this way only ever leads to destruction in the end. We need to offer a better, more beautiful vision of God!
        ii. I know that many people in our country, and in our congregation, are currently rejoicing over the election this past week. It does seem like two different visions of America were on the ballot, and that these two visions share a lot in common with the two visions of God presented today. However, we would still be wise to learn from Joshua and be wary of how easily we conflate our understanding of God with our own tribe or party.
        iii. It is so easy for us to fall into an us-vs-them mindset, and to end up seeking vengeance rather than justice. Even & especially here, let us remember that the way of Jesus is the way of mercy, of crossing boundaries, of loving our enemies, and of working for the healing and redemption of all. Choose this day whom you will serve.

Amen.