

Wesley United Methodist Church

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November 12, 2017

Dwelling and Indwelling

Text: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Matthew 25:1-13

Title: Dwelling and Indwelling

Today's Scripture readings can be confusing if we don't take time to go back and place them in their context. Part of the history of the Hebrew people included becoming slaves in Egypt. With Moses as their leader, God led the people out of Egypt and out of slavery. They spent the next forty years wandering in the wilderness. During that time, they were given the Ten Commandments and they spent 40 years learning how to be faithful to God. Sometimes they did well at this, but at other times they messed up big time.

They really were a lot like us – sometimes we are more faithful than at other times and we are always learning how to be the people God called us to become.

After forty years, they prepared to enter the Promised Land and before he died Moses turned his leadership over to Joshua. Joshua led the people into the Promised Land and their eventual settling in the land. This involved a great deal of history and conflicts. Now, in today's reading, many years later the land is at peace, the people are settled, and Joshua now quite old is nearing the end of his life. Joshua has called together the leaders of the tribes of Israel and chapters 23 and 24 include Joshua's farewell speech and his charge to the people. His message is summarized by the words, "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.”

Not long after his farewell speech, Joshua died at the age of 110 after faithfully following and serving God all his life.

Over the last few weeks, we have been building a symbolic house of our faith journey. We began with Jesus as the cornerstone – upon which all of our life is aligned. We added the pillars that support our journey - those things that give substance to our lives as followers of Christ – Worshipping God, being nurtured in our faith and nurturing others, reaching out to others through missions, and witnessing to our faith as we continue to grow in our faith. Today, our roof has been added. Today, we make the same decision that was placed before the leaders and people to whom Joshua spoke. “Choose this day who you will serve.”

In the sections from Joshua that we didn't read, Joshua, in some detail, describes what God has done for them through the years. None of them had lived through the escape from Egypt, and many of them would not remember the years wandering in the wilderness. Some of them may have been born after they began to enter the promised land. So, Joshua, reminded them of what God had done for them. After many years, it was time for a refresher course.

It would have been tempting for them to forget about God and to focus on what they had done. It would have been tempting to give themselves credit for all that they had accomplished. It happens to us as well, doesn't it? It's so easy to get caught up in the tyranny of everyday life – to get focused on the deadlines, the many demands on our lives and to think that everything depends upon us.

A little over 50 years ago, a group of faithful followers of Christ faced with church buildings being taken over by Urban Redevelopment or buildings that were too big and too hard to maintain came together to form a new faith community that they called Wesley United Methodist Church. They worked hard, sacrificed, prayed, and followed God's leading and the result was the building in which we now worship. Through the years there have been good times here and times when there have been struggles. There have been times when people were excited about what was happening and times when people were discouraged. There have been several different pastors and some of them were loved by almost everyone, and some were loved by some and not by others. There has been a steady Sunday School nurturing and teaching children, youth, and adults. Sometimes the attendance has been larger than at other times. There have been mission projects and outreach to the community.

It would be easy to look back and say, "look what we have done" and give the credit to ourselves rather than to give thanks to God.

There is a quote attributed to Saint Augustine that says, "Pray as though everything depended upon God. Work as though everything depended upon you." I think that's a great thing for us to remember. It is God who inspires us, who calls us and empowers us to stretch beyond our comfort zones. At the same time, God doesn't just wave a magic wand and make things happen – God depends upon us to act, to pray as if everything depends upon God and at the same time to work as though everything depends upon us.

It would have been tempting for the people to whom Joshua spoke to worship the gods that the people of their new land worshipped – the idols, man-made gods that were so popular. It can be easier to worship a god

that you can see than a god that you cannot see. So, Joshua told them that they needed to choose. Would they worship the God who had brought them out of Egypt, who had led them through the wilderness, who had brought them over the Jordan river or would they worship the gods of the Amorites in whose land they were now living.

We face this same question every day. Will we worship the God who has been faithful to us throughout our lives, and the life of this congregation? Will we worship the God who brought us together so that I, at least, have trouble remembering which church people came from originally? Will we worship the God who has brought new people into this faith community; people with different ideas and insights, energy and enthusiasm, different cultures and perspectives, people through whom we have all been blessed? Will we worship the God of the Old and New Testaments, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or will we worship the gods of our culture, the gods of the people among whom we live? Will we worship and serve the god of success, economics, careers, possessions, popularity, politics, you name it?

It is easy in our day to day lives to get caught up in everything around us and to gradually shift our priorities so that the gods of our culture become more important than the God who has created, nurtured, and sustained us.

In the Gospel we see this happening to people. Jesus has told a parable that, again, can be difficult to understand. The story of the wise and foolish maidens as it has been called seems to focus on the women who ran out of oil for their lamps and were excluded from the wedding banquet. It's hard to understand – and the simple summary of “stay awake because you do not know the day nor the hour” is confusing because all

the bridesmaids fell asleep waiting for the groom to arrive. As I have pondered this and read commentators, it seems to me that this is more about staying on course. We know that delay is difficult. Anyone who has ever ridden in a car with a young child knows the impatient cry, “Are we there yet?”

Even though the world is not as we would like it, and most definitely not as God would like it, we still need to choose this day who we will serve. We need to keep our light shining before others; continuing in community, study and prayer, and doing deeds of mercy, offering forgiveness and spreading justice and peace. We are called in our world, to hold onto hope, that the world and each one of us will one day be transformed and fully connected with God. We need to build into our daily lives those habits and disciplines that give hope and empower living.

I think that the oil in the parable can be understood as faith, good works, spiritual practices and reserves that remain constant and shine during the good times as well as the difficult times. This explains why the bridesmaids cannot share the oil; we cannot share spiritual reserves with someone else. Each of us needs to choose this day who we will serve and develop our own spiritual resources for the day when we most need them.

I don't remember who it was, but a professor of religion was on his way to chapel one Sunday morning. As he walked across campus, he met a student who asked him, “Did you decide to go to worship this morning?” The professor replied, “No, I did not decide this morning. I decided many years ago, that I would be in worship on Sunday mornings. Now I don't need to decide each week; the decision has already been made.”

As we decide this day, who we will serve, we are prepared to welcome Christ in all the parts of our lives. We learn to live each day focused on Christ and God's call in our lives.

Joshua warned his people – and us – not to fall back into a lifestyle that shows apathy or negligence with regard to the things that honor Christ. We are invited to choose this day who we will serve – and to make that decision one that we re-affirm every day of our lives. We are invited to look at our lives and our church and ask how our lives are helping the world to welcome Christ.

The people had to decide whether they would obey the Lord, who had proven his trustworthiness, or obey the local gods which were only man-made idols. It's easy to slip into a quiet rebellion; going about life in our own way. But the time comes when we have to choose who or what will control us – who or what will be the center of our lives. The choice is ours. Will it be God, or our own limited personality or some other imperfect substitute? Once we have chosen to be controlled by God's Spirit, we reaffirm our choice every day.ⁱ

Regardless of what others decided, Joshua had made a commitment to God and he was willing to set the example of living by that decision. The way we live shows others the strength of our commitment to serving God. Talk is cheap. We can say we will follow God, but it is much more important to live like we are following God.ⁱⁱ

I invite us, with Joshua, to say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

ⁱ Upper Room Disciplines. Week of November 6-12, 2017.

ⁱⁱ URD