
THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

JOSHUA 24:1-2A, 14-18

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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It is a great convocation at a transitional period when Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem—an important fortress and a religious center—and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, the officers of Israel, the Duke faculty, staff and students, Chapel choir members and musicians, ushers, and other volunteers, area community members, even from other universities. A great convocation, not just for hearing the usual put-me-to-sleep-boring speeches, but to make some serious choices amid the multiplicity of options.

As human beings, we have choices. Students, you chose to apply to Duke and Duke wisely chose to accept you. Duke faculty and staff chose to work at Duke and yes, it goes both ways, so Duke chose you too. As a congregation, you chose to attend worship in-person while others are enjoying their espresso in their pajamas right now while watching the service online from Maryland or other parts of the U.S. or the world (good morning!). We have and make choices every day. You choose to take a shower or not. You choose with whom to spend your time. You choose your hobbies—whether it be knitting or swimming or music-making. We have lots of choices (though I know first year Duke students don't get to choose their roommate, so I do hope it's working out ya'll/for you!)

The biblical texts for today in both Joshua and John also reveal that you are given choices, spiritually. In Joshua's convocation speech, he says, "Now, therefore, revere the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness... 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 living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

And in the Gospel of John, we learn that "many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve [disciples] who were left, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In both cases, there is a spiritual choice. If you wish to go away from Jesus, you can. And if you are unwilling to serve the Lord—as Joshua puts it—you don't have to. Yet there is still a choice made. "Choose this day whom you will serve." Choose this year whom you will serve. It may not be the Lord, but it will be something or someone else. Not choosing to serve or follow the Lord is a choice, a choice to choose something else as god. Even those at the great convocation from the people of Israel or the disciples of Jesus, any denominational tribe, any churchgoing, Bible-reading, early-morning-praying Christian, can decide one day to go another way, regardless of their fervent history of faith. We see this possibility in the ancient scriptures, even as we know it in our time—that people have choices and can choose not to serve God.

And what I realize, which says something about God, is that God allows this. God provides this freedom to choose. Jesus lets those who want to leave him, leave. "Do you wish to go away?" If so, he'll let you, because God chooses freedom over bondage. It's not that Jesus joyfully waves at those leaving him and sings, "Nananana, nananana, hey hey goodbye!" But he lets them go because he believes so much in human freedom.

God is not a dictator or authoritarian figure waging a war against our soul, guiltling or tricking or forcing us into salvation, forcing us to follow, demanding us to love him back. No. God gives us the freedom to choose. If you're unwilling to serve the Lord, ok. But choose this day whom you will serve because we all serve something or someone.

When Joshua tells Israel—"it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that

we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed...”—he’s reminding them that God is a God of freedom thru and thru and chooses freedom over enslavement (Like the Spiritual says based on that story, “Go down Moses”).

God is a God of freedom and God’s freedom initiates our freedom, even if in our freedom we depart from God and go our own way. We are not AI robots of the divine but human children of God whom God desires to be free even if our free choices put us in chains. God doesn’t control us, but we are free to choose, even if it means choosing death over life. You may not want to serve the Lord, ok. But choose this day whom you will serve. It’s d-day, decision day.

This freedom is so important in the life of faith in light of the historical backdrop of the Exodus of the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, as well as the language of freedom throughout the New Testament. Like in Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free...” (Galat 5:1) or in John, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”(John 8:36). There is a spiritual freedom that we may forget when we think we can force others into believing in or following Christ. We can share, sow seeds, and plant, but people are free to choose who and how they will follow, for God chooses freedom.

Even within higher education the notion of academic freedom is vital. There is an academic freedom policy at Duke, and it states three components of academic freedom as it relates to faculty:

- 1) To teach and to discuss in their classes any aspect of a topic pertinent to the understanding of the subject matter of the course being taught.
- 2) To carry on research and publish the results subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties.
- 3) To act and to speak in their capacity as a citizen without institutional censorship or discipline.

So, freedom, even within universities, is a critical value, so much so that this past Spring, Duke set up a special committee to review the institutional policies and structures that oversee academic freedom and responsibility, free expression and engagement on campus. Freedom is important as a value.

We have freedom to make choices. And as we know, there are consequences to our choices. You can decide to stay up all night and party (I know no one here has ever done that!) and still have to take your exam in class at 8:30am, and you might wonder why the exam didn’t go so well. You can decide not to turn in an assignment and get points taken off your final grade. You can choose to not invest in relationships with family and friends and then you realize why no one calls or texts you on your birthday. Ask anyone in prison and they’ll tell you that there are consequences to our choices. On a lighter note, you can choose to work out every morning at the gym and hopefully you’ll see some results! Your present choices impact your future. This is true in our communal life together too.

We choose how to live in community— with humility or arrogance, individualistically or collaboratively, embodying ‘resume virtues’ only or cultivating ‘eulogy virtues’ too. Our choices have an impact. This is true in your spiritual life as well.

Within your God-given freedom, Joshua and Jesus remind us that you can choose ‘no’ to God. But even if you’re unwilling to serve the Lord, you still choose a god whom you serve. Just as in that ancient biblical setting, in our time there’s a plethora of gods vying for our allegiance, attention, and worship. What these scriptures scream out in their own way is this question: Who or what are the gods in your life? Who or what do you serve, if it’s not the Lord?

Some might say that Cameron Indoor Stadium is the number one religious building on campus and for some, sports are their god, and so they sing and dance at the altar of a basketball court. For others, they may be an acolyte in the liturgy of Instagram in service to the god of social media. For others, their gods could be politicians or

social issues or their job and career. We can make anything an idol even creating a god of our own abilities thinking we've reached where we are all by ourselves. But then we hear God's words to the people of Israel after entering their promised land which is the context for Joshua's call to serve God: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant."

We have choices to make and a question to answer: Who is the God/god we serve? It's so critical because so often we become like that which we worship. So many things are competing for our loyalty. So this year, who will you serve?

At the Shechem convocation, the gathered leaders choose to serve the Lord, a God of freedom and life, not bondage and death. Joshua's words about the past work of God revealed who this God would be in the future for them as well. And though some disciples left Jesus, Simon Peter was adamant to say to Jesus: "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." We have the freedom to choose, but it is a matter of life and death. Our freedom to choose is a choice for life or death.

Theologian Carter Heyward once said, "Christian faith must, I believe, point directly and particularly to the human life, faith and teachings of Jesus as Christ, rather than simply to a free-floating symbol of what is valuable to us. For symbols do not, in fact, float freely, but rather are reflections of what we value in our life together. When Christians lose sight of the particular message and mission of Jesus, we open the door to the making of anyone or anything into our 'Christ.'" Choose this day whom you will serve.

But never forget that in God's own freedom, God chose us, even if we never choose him. In Ephesians, "[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world..." (Ephes 1:4). In 1 Peter, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." (1 Peter 2:9). In John, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." God was free to choose and chose to love us.

Our choices don't determine God's love for us, nor did they deter God from delivering the Israelites out of Egypt. God doesn't control us, and we don't control God because God chooses freedom, a freedom that sets us free to be free.

And in our freedom, we have choices, and our choices shape us just as God's choice to love us made God become one of us—human—in Jesus Christ.

God chose you to love, but who or what will you choose to serve?

Make your heart an altar for God and say 'yes' to Christ. As for me and my Powery household *and* Duke Chapel, we will serve the Lord. My name is Luke Powery, and I approve this message.