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A Sermon for Confirmation

a sermon on Joshua 24.1, 14-25

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Joshua does something strange near the end of the book that bears his name. He gathers the tribes of Israel at a holy place, Shechem. Until the temple was built, this was where Israel came to worship. The tabernacle was there with the ark of the covenant. Joshua calls out the leaders of the people. Then he asks the entire assembly: Do you want to serve the Lord or not?

The timing of this is bizarre, and it tells us something about grace. Consider all that had happened to Israel in the 40 plus years prior to this. They had been slaves in Egypt. A shrewd god who planned to make the Hebrews his people and bring them out of slavery into a land he would give them—a shrewd god with that in mind would have staged this scene at the beginning. Moses would have asked the people up front: “Choose this day whom you will serve! If you choose the Lord, he will rescue you from slavery and give you a land flowing with milk and honey.” And the people would have said, “Hey, that’s a sweet deal. We’ll take it.”

But God doesn’t make deals. He makes himself known. He calls. He demands commitment. But he doesn’t make deals. Therefore, in his grace, he led Israel out of Egypt. In his grace, he gave them his laws. In his grace, he set up the whole sacrificial system, which was to prepare them for Christ. In his grace, he led them through the wilderness. Even though the unfaithfulness of the first generation kept them out of the promised land, their children crossed the Jordan. God defeated their enemies and gave them the promised land. Only after all of this does God ask for a commitment. God has kept his promises. Israel now has it good. They are therefore free to make a real choice—not a choice driven by necessity or calculated self-interest. What does their heart say? What do they really want? Whom will they serve? A lot of gods were on the market: gods from Egypt, Canaanite gods, gods their ancestors had worshipped before God made himself known to Abraham. They are finally in a position to make a decision, and the Lord wants one. He has done everything. He has made them his people ... but, they have a decision to make. It’s one of the classic lines of scripture: “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Today we confirm our young people who have been in our confirmation class. I could not resist the parallel between Israel at Shechem and these young people today. Israel, just beginning life in the promised land, still learning what it means to be God’s people. Israel in the adolescent stage of her life as a nation. These young people, just entering their teens. Over the next ten years, they will grow into their adult identities. Even now they are finding their own way, learning to make their own decisions ... and live with the consequences. They are capable of making genuine commitments, even if they do not yet fully realize all that their commitments will mean later on. Joshua summoned Israel to Shechem for an important decision. We summon these young people today for the same reason.

Let me explain confirmation for anyone with a background in a church that does not baptize infants. We do. We baptize infants because we are convinced the grace of God is primary. God claims us and calls us before we can respond, even before we can understand. But here is the catch: Without faith, baptism does not save a person. We are saved by grace, through faith. So by itself, without faith, baptism does not secure eternal life for the one who is baptized. We are happy to baptize infants, but always with the understanding that faith must come. Some Christians say faith has to come first. We do not, but we agree with them that faith is necessary. Some might object: “Well, if you baptize an infant, how do you know that child will grow up to have faith?” To which I would respond, “Well, when you baptize a college student who professes faith, how do you know he or she will continue in that faith throughout life?” The answer to both is: You have to trust God. Baptism is always an act of trust.

Anyway, we baptize infants knowing that someday they will need their own faith. They must claim the identity baptism gives them. They must say, “Yes, this is who I am. I believe God’s promises. I love Jesus Christ. I turn from sin and evil, and I say to God, ‘Not my will but yours be done.’ I ask for God’s grace and commit myself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.” Confirmation is when they do that formally and thereby take their rightful place within the church.

This service of confirmation is the end of a long process of preparation. In this case, we have been working for about a year, mentoring these young people, taking field trips, giving them ministry opportunities, and weekly classes. The idea is: We explain as clearly and compellingly as possible what Christianity really is and what a commitment to Christ means. Then we give them the choice. They can say “yes,” “no,” or “I’m not ready to decide.” Each of the four young people in this class came in with their mind already made up. Each had already come to faith. Each had already made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Our class became a way of growing in faith and understanding. They come today to make a formal, public profession of their faith.

Their faith and our scripture reading confront all of us with two truths. These truths may comfort you. They may scare you. They may gnaw at your heart like a dog with a bone, giving you no peace of mind. They are powerful truths. Like all truths, they are true whether we want them to be or not. What are they?

The first one is: You have a choice to make. Sooner or later in your life—and it may even be today—God puts to you the decision that Joshua put to Israel: Whom will you serve? Will it be the Lord? The choice is up to you. You can say yes to Christ or no. No one can make the decision for you. Not your parents, though they may have had you baptized and forced you to go to church. Not your husband or wife. No one else. Not even God, except that his grace may overwhelm you so that your choice is an obvious one. I mean, can you imagine the people of Israel telling Joshua, “Well, sure, the Lord has done a lot for us, but we’d really like to worship these Canaanite gods”? How could they, after all they had seen and heard? God had given them so much grace, and they knew it, that their decision couldn’t really be anything else. I feel that way about my faith and my life. Jesus died for me and rose again. What other choice could I make? Following him may be hard because I have to constantly submit my will to his, but what

else is there? Only death and despair, as I see it. But get this: Even though God's grace can overwhelm you and make your decision an easy one, it is still a decision you have to make. Every one of us comes to that critical moment when we have to choose.

You might object: "What about those who never hear the Good News? If someone never hears about Jesus, how can they accept or reject him?" That's a very good question. Today I will only say that God is merciful and just, but this is not our problem. You and I know the Good News. We can't plead ignorance. We know our hearts are turned from God. We know Christ offers to give us new hearts to love God. He says, "Give yourself to me—your whole self, and I will make you a new creation." And then we must say yes or no. There is no middle ground. You give yourself to him or you do not.

You might object: "What about grace and predestination and the sovereignty of God? Doesn't God give us faith? After all, without grace, we would not even realize our need or desire God." I confess that I am stumped by the mysterious way God's sovereignty and our human freedom work together. But you need to realize this is a different question from the one I am asking. I want to know: Whom will you serve? The doctrine of predestination asks a different question. It asks: Why do some people say yes to God and others say no?

Whatever you believe about predestination, if you believe anything at all, there are certain basic facts every Christian can agree on: We know what the Good News is: Christ died to reconcile us to God. He invites us to have eternal life through him. We know what the proper response to the Good News is: You believe. You repent. You accept Christ. Then you get baptized if you are not already, and if you have been baptized you profess your faith. When people ponder predestination, they are asking, "Where does the response of faith come from? Why do you accept Christ? Is it because God wants you to or because you want to?" I'm not convinced that's an either/or question, but in any case, that's a different question from: Do you accept Christ or not? Let the theologians puzzle out why you made your decision, if they can. The question you must answer is much simpler and more serious: Jesus Christ—yes or no?

Now, I am confident that most of us have made that decision and have answered "yes." If that's your case, I have one thing to add. While it is true that we all must make a decision for Christ, our choice is on-going throughout life. Every day in hundreds of ways, big and small, we are faced with the same dilemma: My will or his? If this were not so, the Old Testament could have ended with the book of Joshua. If you've read the rest of it, you know: Your decision, once made, must be ratified and reaffirmed over and over again. "Choose *this day* whom you will serve" has a timeless ring to it. Every day is *this day*. As Joshua pointed out to the people of Israel, on-going faithfulness is not easy. It takes a stubborn commitment to God and constant reliance on his grace.

OK, the first truth that hits us today is, we have a decision to make. Once we make it the matter may be settled—it may even be settled for us before we reach the point of decision—but every day our actions either affirm or deny our identity in Christ.

The second truth we cannot avoid is: God's hand is upon us. Israel's decision was easy because they could look back on all the things God had done for them. God had a plan and a purpose for

them. He had done marvelous things to bring them to that time and place. In a similar way, God has been at work with a plan and purpose in the lives of these young people. They are not here by accident. God has led them to this time and place. Along the way God has used parents, relatives, friends, teachers, schools, churches, camps, and all the rest. God has been calling them, helping them to know and love him more. As they have grown physically, they have grown in faith and understanding. They have a long way to go. We all do. God's hand will be on them after today. If anything, his work will intensify. It is the same with all of us. God's hand is upon you, working out his good will. If you belong to Christ, his Spirit lives in you and guides you. As Philippians 1.6 says: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion."

That truth is comforting and scary at the same time. Comforting because God is with me. Scary because his will and my will are often very different, and he will demand of me things I do not find easy. This truth is also very exciting. It makes life an adventure. If you are in Christ, no day is ever pointless. Even if you go through a bad time in your life. You get laid off, and the days seem endless and empty. Death or divorce leave you alone. You get sick and end up lying in bed all day, every day. There are times when our lives feel empty. We feel as if we are just killing time between the good times. But for a Christian this is never true. There are no dead times, only quieter spaces. You can be sure God is still present and still at work, maybe doing things you would not let him do during busier days. Even at the end of life, when you have no more productive, fun-filled days with family and friends to look forward to, God is still moving with a plan and a purpose. Life is never meaningless. No day is ever wasted if you pay attention to God.

You may remember the day I baptized my son Daniel. If you were here, how could you forget it? That day I preached on the importance of knowing who you are. If you don't know who you are, the world will chew you up and spit you out. Guaranteed. I am thankful that these young people know who they are. They are coming today to claim their identity in Christ. Their baptism says, "You belong to Jesus Christ. You are a child of God. You are a priest serving God. You are a missionary to the world he loves. You are part of his people, the body of Christ, the church." Today they come to say, "Yes, I am. God help me." God help us all. Amen.

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