

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church - January 10, 2021

Hymns: 808 – Come in, come in New Year; 324 – Great Is Thy Faithfulness;
685 – How Firm A Foundation

Scripture: Joshua 24:14-21; Colossians 1:9-12; Matthew 28:18-20

Sermon Title: The Year of Living Faithfully

Joshua 24:14-21

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served 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.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

Colossians 1:9-12

Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Matthew 28:18-20

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Here we are, January 10, and I wonder how many well-intentioned New Year's resolutions have already found their way out to the curb, to take their place beside the bags of recycling and abandoned trees. Resolutions are, as we all know, more easily made than kept, and broken most easily of all.

And yet we persist. We persist in making resolutions because we know that it is only in making a commitment and remaining faithful to that commitment will our lives be changed, and for the better. Resolutions are easy. Commitment is hard. And remaining faithful to that commitment is hardest of all. And a commitment to faithfulness is what our Scriptures are about this morning.

Actually, our Old Testament Scriptures are about Joshua, one of the great Old Testament guys. Years ago, when people read the Bible, Joshua's life story was one known to every school child, but nowadays, the name is familiar to us, but the story vague. Something about Jericho, maybe, and walls falling down, as in our Children's Story Bible Lego Video, but that's about it. Which is a shame, because Joshua has something to tell us which is no less important than it was when he first told it some three thousand, two hundred years ago. First, though, we'd better find out who this Joshua is.

Those who have seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* will know a lot more about Joshua than the Bible does; in that great old movie, one of my all-time favourites, he's played by John Derek, young and muscular, and he gets to do all sorts of things like fight Vincent Price with a whip and win the girl and stand about looking well-oiled and ready-to-go. There's nothing in the Bible about him fighting Vincent Price with a whip and winning the girl and standing about looking well-oiled and ready-to-go, but it makes for an exciting movie.

As for the Bible, Joshua first shows up in the Scriptures in the Book of Exodus. He's a military man, and Moses' aide-de-camp. When there's a job needs doing, Moses just looks in Joshua's direction, and it gets done, no matter how hard, no matter how dirty. When Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, Joshua waits for him, and when Moses returns, forty days later, Joshua is waiting still, while everyone else figured that whatever happened to Moses on that mountain, he ain't coming back, so bring on the golden idols and the dancing girls. Only Joshua had remained faithful, and that faithfulness was to be his stock-in-trade.

His faithfulness to Moses continued to the end of Moses' life, at which time God told old man Moses to pass his authority onto Joshua, "a man in whom is the spirit." Moses' last words to Joshua are even saved for us; listen:

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (Deuteronomy 31:7-8 NIV)

Well, being strong and courageous were the two things Joshua did best, and when Moses died, Joshua inherited the job, and his faithfulness now extended directly to God. The remainder of Joshua’s long life is nothing more than a carrying out – to the letter - of the job description Moses gave as his parting gift, and is pretty thoroughly chronicled in the not-surprisingly-named Book of Joshua, number 6 of the Bible’s collection of 66 books. In The Book of Joshua, the Israelites make their way into the Promised Land, with all sorts of drama and adventure, including the famous Battle of Jericho. Maybe you remember the song:

*“Now the word of the Lord came to Joshua;
Take the city of Jericho!
March around that city for six straight days
And on the seventh day march and blow!”*

Despite sounding like the world’s all-time worst plan for conquering a heavily walled city, it was effective (so effective that eager tour guides will show you the tumbled stones to this day). The Promised Land was wide open from then on in, yet not without its struggles.

Through it all, while the people waffled in their commitment, while the army wavered in its loyalty, while the victories and defeats had the nation in a turmoil, Joshua remained steady, and saw the plan through to the end. And when it appeared as though, at long last, Israel had a home it could call its own, Joshua, for maybe the first time in his life, sat down, and gave the longest speech we ever heard from him, or were ever to hear from him again, and that brings us back to the beginning of the sermon when I told you that Joshua has something to say to us that is no less important than it was some 3200 years ago, and it is this: after summing up Israelite history in a paragraph or two, Joshua issues this challenge:

Worship the LORD, obey him, and always be faithful. Get rid of the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived on the other side of the Euphrates River and in Egypt. But if you don’t want to worship the LORD, then choose right now! Will you worship the same idols your

ancestors did? Or since you're living on land that once belonged to the Amorites, maybe you'll worship their gods. I won't. My family and I are going to worship and obey the LORD!

It wasn't an easy speech, it wasn't a beautifully worded speech, and it certainly wasn't a subtle speech. But it came from the depths of Joshua's crusty old heart, and the people knew it.

And so they answered, "We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

And old Joshua looked them right in the eye and said that he was warning them, here and now, that they better mean what they say, because if they don't then the Lord God Almighty himself is going to be angry, and then watch out. And the people said again that they meant it, really, cross their hearts.

And so Joshua laid down his sword and picked up a pen and wrote out all that they had promised in a big book called "The Law Of God." And when they rolled up the book he took the stone upon which it had rested, and with the strength left in him he rolled it over to the bottom of the big old oak which was planted by the Holy Place, and set it to rest on end. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he looked upon the people one last time, and said the last words he was to utter:

"Now I am 110 years old and ready to die. And when I die, I won't be here to warn you when you forget your promise to God. But this rock here has been listening, and has heard every word you said. And this rock is going to outlast us all. And if you change your mind, and carry on any old way, and the Lord God Almighty comes and asks what's up, this old rock will remember what you promised. The Lord God Almighty will ask this rock what you said, and this rock will say to God, 'We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.' So be faithful to God. Amen."

To be faithful. For Joshua, to be faithful meant to make up your mind one way or the other, and stick with it. To be faithful to God was to serve and obey him. To be faithful meant never to forget, as long as the very rocks remain. And if rocks do anything, they remain.

We are called to be faithful. That's what God wants for us, expects from us, made us to be. But being faithful, when it gets right down to it, is not just about thinking pleasant thoughts: it is about sticking with it even when you don't feel like it. It is about commitment, and following through. It's not always easy, just like keeping a resolution is not always easy, just like doing just about anything of any lasting value is not always

easy. But it is not impossible, because while we are trying to be faithful to God, God is absolutely-one-hundred-percent-guaranteed being faithful to us. Remember the key to Joshua's faithfulness? It was this promise: "*The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.*" And it is the same promise God has, in Christ, given to us: "*I will go before you and be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you.*"

In our New Testament reading we eavesdrop on Paul's conversation with the church in Colossae, to whom he refers as "the faithful people of Christ." And he gives us a clue as to what this faithfulness means:

...lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father.

For Paul, that's what faithfulness is: to lead a life worthy of and pleasing to God; Bear fruit; grow; be patient; give thanks. Or, another way, live your life diligently carrying out the work of God as you grow; enduring setbacks with patience; and surrounding it all with joyful thanksgiving. Not a bad definition of a faithful life, and one which might even pass Joshua's careful eye.

The year is just begun. 2021 stretches before us still, an empty canvass upon which we will paint our story of the next twelve months. We pray, of course, it will be better than the last twelve! And, like Joshua and the people of Israel - like Paul and the church in Colossae - we have a choice to make. We can choose to be faithful – to lead a life worthy of and pleasing to God, carrying out God's work, growing in God's love – or we can fritter the year away as we have so often done in the past, remembering last year's resolutions with wistful regret, while time whips by and our lives – and the world around us - are none the better. And this year, of all years, the world needs "better."

Make the choice. Make the choice, and stick with it. Right here, right now, say to yourself and to God, "2021 will be different. No half-way commitment. No lukewarm faith. I will serve. I will work. I will grow in knowledge and commitment and love. I will press on despite all that might distract me from my goal, and as I so do, I will do so with thanksgiving and with joy."

And as you make this resolution, as you make this vow, remember the commitment God has made to you, the commitment that makes it all possible: "*The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor*

forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged... For surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

God will do his part. Let's do ours. Just like Joshua did, so many years ago, let's make our choice. With patience, determination and the help of God, may this be our commitment and our song: *My family and I are going to worship and obey the LORD!* May 2021 be, for us, “The Year of Living Faithfully.” Thanks be to God! Amen.