

**“Decision Time”**  
**Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**November 12, 2017**

I was 7 years-old when I first “made a decision for Christ.” I walked down the aisle of the little Baptist church where we lived in rural South Carolina and declared Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. It was unusual for someone so young to be making such a decision, but the truth is that everything in my church had been conditioning me toward this decision since I was born. Every sermon of each Sunday of my life had been followed with the altar call - the hymn of invitation - to give my life over to the one who had died to save me. Plus, I had an older brother. When he ran into the woods to play, I followed him. When he learned how to cut the grass I wanted to learn how to cut the grass. When he wanted to be the Green Lantern superhero for Halloween, I “chose” to be Superman. And when he got out of his pew to make a decision for Christ, I followed after him.

In retrospect I think the pastor of that little church should have stopped me. He should have said, “You are too young to be making a decision for Christ. Call me after you’ve learned your multiplication tables.” My parents should have grabbed hold of my belt and pulled me back into the pew. “Son,” my father could have said, “you don’t even know when it’s the right time to make a decision to brush your teeth. You’re certainly not ready to be making any decisions for God.” But no one stopped me so I made my decision, way before I understood its implications.

Joshua isn’t as restrained as my pastor or my parents. “You cannot serve the Lord,” he tells them. This is a jealous God; If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then God will turn and do you harm, and consume you. You’re not ready to make this decision. You’re not ready to turn your life over to this God. You have no idea what this is going to mean.

Joshua is uncompromising. Way more uncompromising than the pastor who baptized me. Way more uncompromising than my concerned parents. Way more uncompromising than me.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if we were that uncompromising at Brown Memorial. Maybe when we hold inquirer’s classes we shouldn’t be so accommodating. Maybe we ought to say, “No, you don’t really want to join this church. This God is way too jealous and demanding. This God will ask more from you than you are willing to give. You just *think* you want to follow this God, but you have no idea what it’s going to cost you.” Uncompromising. Maybe during stewardship season instead of celebrating God’s generosity in our lives, we ought to tell people not to risk it. “Dear Church Member,” we could say in our letter to every member. “God won’t be satisfied with your leftovers. God wants it all. And chances are you’re not willing to give it. So just, don’t even. . .” Uncompromising. Maybe before we sign people up for public action we ought to say, “we know how uncomfortable public tension makes you feel when it’s generated by the BUILD

organization. That's nothing in comparison to the public tension that Jesus is going to create. Why don't you work on that and come back in a year." Uncompromising.

That's basically what Joshua says to the people. He invites them to choose to serve the LORD then promptly turns around and tells them they're not capable of doing it. Uncompromising. Severe. Even after the people say "Joshua, really, we *do promise* to follow this God completely" his response is "very well, you are witness against yourselves." I'm thinking of changing the new member liturgy to reflect it. "Do you really promise to follow Jesus? Yes. Completely? Yes. With everything that you have and everything that you are? Yes. Seriously? Seriously. Cross your heart and hope to die?"

I think Joshua is uncompromising because he knows that there are other gods to choose from in the land where they are going to be living – gods that look more appealing than the old God of Israel whose concern for neighborliness, whose concern for justice starts to feel like a drag on personal freedom. Those Canaanite gods of self-sufficiency<sup>1</sup> – that promise everything you would every want for yourself with no concern for anybody else – they appear to offer so much more. Those gods that promise if you just make this little offering or that one when the priest calls you up during Canaanite stewardship season, you'll fulfill your religious requirements so that you can have everything you want with no concern for anyone else. I think Joshua is so severe because he knows there are plenty of gods to choose from – less demanding gods who promise so much more for so much less.

You know those gods. Those technological gods that promise unprecedented freedom while chaining us to our electronic devices, turning us into 24-hour productivity machines. Those law and order gods that promise some of us safety by locking up children who are emulating the same violent behaviors that our community hasn't protected them from. Those gods of exploitation that promise some corporations powers that belong only to people, and a some men powers over women's bodies without their consent.

Joshua's afraid that his own people do not understand that the God of Israel won't be satisfied with a little offering here, a little homage there; that this God wants more than a little bit of our extra time, more than some formulaic words about "making a decision for Christ" as if those words are all God wants from us. Joshua knows that this is a jealous God. A God who invites decision. Not a decision about disembodied religion, but a decision about our living – "a life or death decision," as Walter Brueggemann puts it, "about God and neighbor. "The God-decision," Brueggemann writes, "is a recognition that we are not autonomous to do whatever we may want to do. The God of covenant is no therapeutic push-over who benignly accepts selfish anti-neighborliness and the cheapening of the human fabric. The neighbor-decision is an awareness that the *ones unlike us* merit, because they are present, inclusion in the goodies of the community, so that we are not free to engage in private greed and acquisitiveness."

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Making the God Decision," *HuffPost blog*, November 2, 2011, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/walter-brueggemann/joshua-2413a-1425\\_b\\_1070263.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/walter-brueggemann/joshua-2413a-1425_b_1070263.html).

And it's no wonder Joshua is so uncompromising on this either/or decision. Because all you have to do is look around and see how compromised our faith can become in the Canaanite marketplace of religion. Where partisan defenders of a Senatorial candidate accused of pedophilia try to justify it by a reference to Joseph's courtship of Mary. Where a Presidential candidate can get a pass from some Christian leaders on his bragging about assaulting women. Where a tax overhaul can be debated in our land by Christians on the left and the right only referring to the middle class, as if the poor aren't our concern. Where the suffering of Black children is only heard and recognized after white people get a taste of the epidemic of violence facing the poorest of our neighborhoods.

I used to think that the problem with my Baptist upbringing was fear behind the invitation. That you were "invited" to declare Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, but if you didn't take the "invitation" God was gonna get you, or just let you burn.

But the more I watch our city descend into fear. . .the more I watch people cherishing their freedom to own a gun more than 30,000 people who die by guns in our country each year. . .the more I watch us choosing our leaders by who can smack down their enemies with the most aggressive tweets, the more I think maybe a little dose of fear – fear of the right kind – might just be appropriate. If you go after those other gods, it will come back to bite you. Technology without a conscience will turn us all into slaves for somebody else. Law and order without justice for the poor and vulnerable will lead us down a path of ruin. Morality defined only by what gives you personal pleasure always leads to those with more power exploiting those with less. Those who live by the gun will die by the gun. You can find gods who promise more for less, you can run from this God who demands so much, but you will not find healing without her.

Maybe the problem with my Baptist upbringing wasn't that it included a healthy dose of fear. Maybe it was fear of the wrong thing. It's not that God wants to whack people for not giving verbal assent to some Christocentric formula. God doesn't sit on a cloud somewhere with a book checking off the names of every human being who repeats a passcode correctly. No. I think God has warned us so many times that we will not find our own salvation disconnected from that of other people. We will not find our own healing apart from child survivors of trauma who need to be treated, not locked up. We cannot go through life by grabbing as much as we can for ourselves and expect the poor not to do the same. We cannot chase after gods who make promises they can never keep and expect there to be no consequences.

We have to choose whom to serve. And the good news is that we do have a choice. There is a God who cares about the whole neighborhood. There is a God who knows the path to peace. There is a God who knows our skin color doesn't change the shape of our tears or the color of our blood. There is a God who won't forsake the survivors of trauma. We have a choice.

Every year in my house, Kate and I sit down to decide what we can pledge to the church. I'm not going to lie – it's always a painful decision. The rapacious gods of our land are always trying to suck more out of us. We have to fight to distinguish needs from wants and being responsible from being greedy in the marketplace of

the gods that is always trying to confuse those things. I'm the first to know that if we don't make a commitment to God and church first, there won't be anything left over after those gods are done with us. Joshua was right – following this God isn't easy, it doesn't come without a cost.

But when I consider the people that God has gathered in this place – the people God has chosen – to go up against the gods of greed and the gods of fear – to carve out a community not as an end to itself, but as a blessing to the whole neighborhood; to lift our voices sometimes in protest, sometimes in praise – it leaves me grateful that I'm not the only one who got up out of my pew and accepted the invitation to follow Jesus. I'm not the only one who accepted the assignment before I knew how hard it would be. I'm not the only one who believes that in a city and a nation brought to its needs by fear, we don't have to be afraid. I'm not the only one who is willing to say – as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.