

Aug. 23, 2015

Texts: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; John 6:56-69

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For those who don't know me, let me say right away that I'm not a minister, though I have played one on stage. I'm not ordained anywhere, not even on the Internet. But I did grow up in a pastor's household, so when I'm invited to preach, there's a subversive element I can't resist.

So that's what I'm doing here. What are you doing here?

The forecast calls for partly cloudy skies, with a nice breeze, lower humidity and cooler temperatures. Why are you indoors?

And why here, of all places? You could go to the lake, you could go for a bike ride. You could take the dog for a nice long walk. You could get a jump on your laundry before Monday morning arrives.

What are you doing here?

You don't have to answer; I mean the question rhetorically. I'm asking it because I think it's significant that you chose to come to church this morning.

My rhetorical question isn't the only one we've heard today. There are plenty of rhetorical questions in the Bible.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" "Where were you when I created the earth?" "O death, where is your victory?" And from today's Gospel: "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

Joshua, in today's Old Testament reading, doesn't so much ask a rhetorical question as issue a rhetorical invitation, if there is such a thing. He says,

“And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

I want to say it again: “As for me and my house, we will serve the lord.”

Members of Hope’s senior choir heard those words thundered from the pulpit at a church convention 20 or so years ago, where the guest preacher was the Baptist clergyman Tony Campolo. I think the assembly applauded. We Lutherans come from a different tradition, where sermons are filled with thorny questions and gentle challenges. I was taken a little aback, and thrilled to the soles of my shiny choir shoes, to hear somebody preach so insistently, so prophetically. Campolo talked about the need to raise young people in the faith, insisting that they go to church every Sunday. He said parents would ask him, “Won’t they rebel?” To which he answered, of course they’ll rebel. They’re teenagers, it’s their job to rebel. It’s your job to give them something to rebel against.

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” If I ever learn to do needlepoint, I’ll put those words on a sampler.

When Joshua says them, he’s inviting his fellow Israelites to go ahead, find some other god to worship. Nobody takes him up on it.

There’s a similar moment in today’s Gospel. Jesus asks his disciples if they want to follow some other path. Peter answers with a rhetorical question of his own: “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

You’ll recall that we just sang those words as part of today’s Gospel acclamation. We’ve sung them on countless Sundays, but have we ever listened to the words? We sing, “Alleluia, Lord to whom shall we go?” as if we were asking for directions. Peter wasn’t asking Jesus for directions. He surely wasn’t asking for nominations of other messiahs to follow. If

anything, he was speaking sarcastically. He was telling Jesus that he wouldn't think of turning to anyone but him.

We all know people who would take Peter's question literally – who are willing to go to someone other than the God we know. Not only that; they seem willing, even determined, to try to invent a God that makes sense to them, a God that they can believe in. Maybe they describe themselves as spiritual without being religious. Maybe they say they were raised as Christians, but can't stand the hypocrisy of the church. Or they can't believe that a loving God would subject his children to the pain and suffering we see around us every day.

A guy I know talks that way. To him, every bad thing that happens is one more proof that God is a fairy tale. He says, "I know that terrible stuff is going to happen to me. Instead, you're trying to tell me that all will be well, and I don't believe it."

In my friend's view, if there's a God who can do anything, then he must do everything – that is, everything that happens must be according to a divine script, must be ordained in advance by God. And it's not as if he's the only one who feels that way. Maybe at some time of tragedy in his life, a well-meaning Christian tried to console him by saying, "Everything happens for a reason." I wish people would stop saying that.

I don't think terrible things happen for a reason, or because God ordered them. I think they happen because God created a universe in which they can happen. And God is there with us when they do.

I hope you saw President Obama's eulogy for Clementa Pinckney and the others killed at Emanuel Church in Charleston. I thought it was a remarkable speech. It was amazing and wonderful to hear the civil chief executive of our country speak from a decidedly religious point of view. He talked about grace and the spirit. He spoke of God using a horrible moment and a racist murderer to accomplish a miracle.

I also loved that speech because the setting was culturally so different from that of the president's other speeches. There were little flourishes from the organ, and an audience of people saying things like "Amen" and "That's right." If Congress would allow itself a few "amens" during the State of the Union, the energy of that event might be very different.

My nonbelieving friend would say that the murders in Charleston prove his point. How could an omnipotent, all-powerful God allow such a thing to happen? In a church, no less? Nine believers gunned down in the act of studying scripture?

How, indeed? How could God allow that, and still be God? Shouldn't we get to work inventing a better God, a more powerful God or a more loving God?

That's another rhetorical question, because of course God is God, and doesn't need us to invent him, and wouldn't be God if he did.

Which takes us back to that Old Testament moment with Joshua, and that New Testament moment with Jesus, when Scripture seems to invite us to choose. But I think whether we choose God is less important than that God has chosen us.

God actually did have a choice, and could have fashioned any kind of creation he preferred. He could have made humanity in something less than his image. He could have created a world full of humanoids who were a lot less trouble. We would harbor no doubt. We would go to church every Sunday. We would love him automatically and unanimously.

And we wouldn't have so much trouble following his commandments. We wouldn't be unfaithful to him or to our spouses. We wouldn't become drunks or abusers or cheaters or racists or murderers or sinners of any kind. We would protect the environment and share all of God's resources because it would be in our nature to do so, not because we chose to do so.

But that's not the way God made us. God did not choose to create robots. He chose to create us. And then he risked everything to be in relationship with us.

In the Genesis story, God made the animals and then he made humans, because he wasn't satisfied with the animals. Animals, as we know or think we know, behave according to instinct, not thought. Very seldom do we hear of animals choosing to do evil, even though that bear with the rock at the Minnesota Zoo was pushing it. God chose to create humans, and he put them in a paradise that was theirs to keep so long as they followed his word. And then he gave them a choice; they could follow his word or not, because they were humans, not animals. The humans chose not to obey God's word, and we all know how that turned out.

But that was the way it had to be. A choice that presents only a single option isn't a choice at all.

What would be the point of striving to do right if we could never do wrong? What would our worship this morning mean if we had no choice but to be here?

You did have a choice. You decided not to walk the dog, or get a jump on your laundry, or go to the lake. You chose to come to God's house and hear his word and share a meal in his name. You chose to rededicate yourself to discerning and choosing to follow God's will in your life. As for you and your house, you serve the Lord.

That is how we live in relationship to God. Listen to the words of Thomas Merton's famous prayer:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know

myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

In that prayer lies the answer to my atheist friend: It isn't that nothing bad will ever happen to us, in this choice-plagued world. Bad things will happen, but God will be there for us. Our psalm for today makes the same promise:

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The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the LORD delivers him from them all.

Yes, all sorts of terrible things will happen. And yes, all will be well.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.