

Choices

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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 and Matthew 25:1-13

Between the time I wrote these words and spoke them into cyberspace and the time you engage them, it is likely that a winner will have been determined in the 2020 presidential election. Things seem to be trending in that direction.

I wish I had one of the big fancy boards that not only could analyze the percentages of every precinct in Arizona and Georgia and Pennsylvania, but that could announce the winner much more quickly. But we count votes, and rightly so.

I remember when I stood as a candidate for moderator of the General Assembly. The electronic voting system broke down and paper ballots had to be cast, and counted. It was an agonizingly slow period of time, made all the more difficult because of the fact that I came in second.

For all of the reasons we know so well, and some that will take a long time to figure out, this election will be historic, for good and for ill, happening as it did during a global pandemic, happening as it did when we are as divided as we have been in a very long time. The pandemic persists, as do our divisions.

I do not know which will take longer to heal, but we are called to heal both, to be “repairers of the breach,” as the Bible tells us.

I did not presume to tell you how to vote – it’s bad form, it threatens our tax status, but more so, it swims against one of our primary theological affirmations, that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” So I did not presume to tell you now to vote. I suggested some values that might be in play as you discerned, and I did presume to tell you TO vote, and I hope you did.

No human system of government is perfect, because it is, of course, human, flawed in so many ways. We have, however, determined that democracy is a pretty good way to govern, in that it places power in as many hands, and voices, as possible. We've liked it so much that we have built a way of running the church along similar lines. It's called Presbyterianism. More voices are better than fewer. Shared power is better than concentrated power.

I know that there are some watching this who are very pleased with whatever the result will be, and that some of you are not. Given the divided nature of our body politic, that's probably as true in 2020 as it has been in a while. Social media doesn't help. I am concerned that the very real divisions in our body politic will be difficult to heal, not impossible, but difficult. I am hopeful that we can move toward our common values as a nation, *e pluribus unum*, from many, one. That won't be easy. Our union seems very fragile right now.

That sense of "oneness" doesn't mean uniformity or agreement. That would not feel very American. It does mean soul-searching for all of us, and it means a particular kind of soul-searching for we who wear both the mantle of citizen and the mantle of a person of faith, a follower of Jesus.

Much has been written, and will be written, about that component of all of this – the conflated, often conflicted, role of religion in American politics. I have spoken a lot about that in the last few weeks, insisting that there is a role for faith in our American public life, and even a transformative role, never partisan, never equating one party with faith and other other with no faith, or vice versa. Regardless of the occupant of the White House, the political and cultural and economic and social issues facing the United States that have implications for our faith are consequential – racism, poverty, health, the climate, many more. We measure our political participation by a different set of affirmations. They are simple, and never simplistic. Love your neighbor. Blessed are the peacemakers. Let justice roll down.

So what do we do? We take a deep breath, again, presuming that by the time your eyes connect with mine on a screen that a result will be declared. We take a deep breath. We say a prayer, as we did this week, for this nation, for the candidate who won and the candidate who didn't, and all who supported and advised them. We pray for a kind of unity that does not smooth over real and deep difference on important matters, but that does not allow political opposition

to harden into hatred and demonizing. We take a deep breath; we pray, and then we roll up our sleeves and reengage in the work we are called to do, the two-fold work of loving God and loving neighbor, seeking to be both faithful citizen and faithful Christian, exercising the power we have been given faithfully and calling all those in power to accountability.

Am I optimistic about this breach-repairing work? Good question. Since we affirm a certain brand of Christianity that has John Calvin as a noted forbear, we understand that the human proclivity toward sin is strong. Calvin called it “total depravity,” and while it is never a good marketing strategy, it seems on point. So optimism? Perhaps not. But Calvin sought to follow Jesus, who was a purveyor of hope, not “I hope the Phillies can finally turn it around” or “I hope I can find a parking space,” but hope in God’s promises, in God’s capacity to make a way where there seems to be no way.

On Monday evening, I was privileged to participate in two prayer services, one outdoors in the cold wind and one online. Both multi-faith. Both diverse and inclusive in many ways. Both filled with concern about very important matters and both, at the same time, filled with a sense of hope, that God was not done with this project just yet. That sense of hope keeps us going, I believe, and confirms our sense of calling, this precious ministry, that we share together.

Each of us, I hope, made a choice on how we voted with a sense of integrity. In that sense, I have been thinking of choices a lot these days.

We make quotidian, minor choices all of the time. Coke or Pepsi? What Netflix show will I binge next? Nick Foles vs. Carson Wentz?

We make bigger choices. Will I become a vegetarian? Who will I vote for? What school will I go to? Will I go to school?

We make even bigger choices? What will be my work? Who, if anyone, will I partner with in my life? How can I come out to my family?

We have been living in a season of choices, decisions, how we come to perspectives on important matters. I aim not to settle those choices for you; some remain unsettled for me. Our risk assessment threshold for COVID-19. How do we

think about the future of policing? What does it mean to support a candidate, or to stand in opposition to a candidate? To embrace what that candidate represents, positions, perspectives.

Again, I aim not to settle those choices for you. If nothing else, however, the year of our Lord 2020 has provided opportunities for clarification, for sifting and sorting, for separating. We have had time – in some ways – and the issues have been so dramatic, that the choices have seemed clear. What we do with those choices is another matter – boldness or timidity, head and heart, and so forth. That’s always the case, how we put our beliefs into action, and in a particular way when the stakes seem so high, as they do right now.

And then there are the moments when we make the biggest choices, life-changing, narrative altering, choices.

Joshua, the leader, has gathered the people – all of the tribes, for a kind of summit. The Israelite people had been through so much, and now they are in the land. Joshua reminds them of God’s continuing providence. “I saved your ancestors and I gave you this land,” God says through Joshua. After recounting that journey, that history, it is time for a reset. “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.”

Joshua continues: “Now 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.”

It is a dramatic, cinematic, iconic moment. You halfway expect a loud ovation to erupt. And in a way, it does. The people respond. Yes. Absolutely. We’re in. We will serve God too. In that moment, Joshua understands that talk is cheap, that if the people are to commit, their commitment needs to be real, their choices not made in the emotion of the moment, but a real, true, steadfast choice. The people double down, our ancestors in faith double down. “No – we will serve God.” And Joshua affirms and confirms that choice, and a covenant is made, a binding promise, that we seek to live into even in the fall of 2020. We choose. We will serve God, and no other, whatever that other may be, however we define those other gods, whatever allegiance those other gods might demand.

This is about worship, yes, and ritual. But it is about so much more. Geoff McElroy writes that "The God of Israel demanded much more than just proper worship and ritual, but demanded justice within the community, concern for the poor, widow, and orphan, concern for the stranger, alongside proper religious practice."

Put away all those other gods and serve God. These are life-changing, life-affirming choices made not once, but made again and again, renewed each new day, playing itself out in ordinary time, as you decide *who* you will be TODAY, and *how* you will be TODAY. With each new day, each new opportunity, each new challenge, an ongoing opportunity to reflect in your own life, in your heart and soul and relationships and work and play and spending and voting, what saying "no" to any other god and saying "yes" to this God looks like. Amen.