

Yr. B, Proper 16
August 26, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1414 Words

Lessons: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

And then there was the day when Dinah, who was new in town, went out to meet the women of her new city of Shechem. Instead, she met a prince. He was the prince of the whole region, a fertile plain nestled beneath two tall mountains near the river.

This sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it? It's not. It *is* a love story, however—just not like you probably imagine it to be. You see, the powerful prince was not a nice man. He was just like other powerful men who think they should be able to have whatever they want...or whomever they want.

You should know that the 'Me Too' movement did not begin in 2017. You can read all about it in Genesis, chapter 34. It is a story of brotherly love that you will never forget. And it all happened at Shechem *and it all happened to Shechem*. You see, the name of the city was also the name of the prince.

And then there was the day—more than 500 years later—when Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem. Now, remember that Israel was the father of Dinah...not to mention all his sons whose offspring *became* the twelve tribes of Israel.

Remember—Israel is the name Jacob earned for wrestling with God...for striving with God. We want to think that life with God is just a picnic, but the biblical truth—from the beginning (from Genesis)—is that life with God involves wrestling and striving.

So, how have you wrestled with God lately? How have you felt stretched, challenged, and uncomfortable? If you *only* perceive God as comforting, then you are not following the God of Jacob, the God of Israel, the God of Moses and Joshua, the God we encounter—personally—in Jesus.

This God—*our God*—comforts us and also makes us uncomfortable. This God—*our God*—gives us peace and also challenges us. This God—*our God*—embraces us as we are and also stretches us. God knows that strength and courage *only* develop in human bodies and souls when there is resistance.

Entertainment—which we all love—will not make us strong. The sundry preoccupations of our lives—which we all indulge—they will not make us courageous. Strength and courage are gifts of God, available to those who are willing to get close enough to wrestle...and strive...with God. These gifts emerge when we are stretched and challenged...with discomfort.

And this is the choice Joshua presents in today's Old Testament lesson. Joshua offers a choice to all the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel on that day in Shechem. Strong, courageous Joshua challenged all those powerful men—men who had every reason to think (*like Shechem*) that they could have whatever they wanted.

Joshua challenged them to serve God, not themselves. Joshua challenged them to serve as leaders with sincerity and faithfulness. Boy, do we need a voice like Joshua's in this land. We need a voice who will challenge *our* leaders by saying, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

Here's the thing: we are not tempted by the ancient gods of the Amorites. We can't even remember their names! Instead, *we* are tempted by our contemporary varieties of those gods—the personalities and things which we believe will help make us prosperous and comfortable. We honor and follow these lesser gods as much as those ancient people did. Our gods just have more sophisticated or celebrity names than the Amorites'.

“Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods...,” we say, as they said. Yet, we still want all the prosperity and comfort to which we are so accustomed. We want it all, don't we?

I mean, who among us really wants to be more stretched in our thinking...or more challenged with our financial offerings...or more uncomfortable in serving other people for God's sake? Do we really want to wrestle with God when every other political and commercial aspect of our lives promises more wealth and more comfort?

And then there was the day more than 1400 years later when Jesus arrived in Shechem and met a woman at...(wait for it) Jacob's well...the well of Israel...the well where Dinah went to meet the women of Shechem...the well where the sons of Israel drank when they challenged the prince and his minions...the well where Joshua gathered all the leaders of the twelve tribes and challenged them. This is the well where life and death choices are made. This is the well where people get stretched...and challenged...and uncomfortable.

This is the well where Jesus promised a new life to a stranger, a woman who had five husbands and was living with a boyfriend...#6. This is the well where Jesus—like Joshua—presents a challenging, stretching, uncomfortable choice. Jesus challenges her (and us) to think of God more broadly than we do, for our God is not a regional god or even a national god.

Life with God is deeper than the *most* sacred well. Life with God reaches farther than the region of Samaria or Judea or America or any other land that is blessed. And life with God includes people who are very different than we are. This life with God is more than a picnic. It stretches and challenges us with the uncomfortable task of becoming stronger and more courageous.

This life with God is on the move—always and everywhere. And that means we are called to be on the move as well. We are called—*like Jesus' disciples get called*—to be part of his movement. Our Presiding Bishop refers to it quite simply as the Jesus Movement. And we are the Episcopal branch of this stretching, challenging, uncomfortable movement. Following God *for us* means following Jesus, and this means choosing today *and every day* whom we will serve. Will we serve others in Jesus' name...or will we serve only ourselves with the lesser gods who always promise prosperity and comfort?

Finally, there was the day, a year after Jesus met the woman at the well in Shechem, when he was once again on the move, teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum—the Gospel story we heard this morning. Jesus had just shared a prosperous, comfortable meal with 5,000 people. He was the epitome of popularity because he gave people what they wanted...until he began to challenge them, stretch them, and make them uncomfortable.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,” said Jesus. “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” we ask, just like his disciples asked. But then Jesus asks a question. “Does this offend you?” He wants to know, even though he *already* knows, because the crowds are turning back and walking away by the thousands.

They are like us. They want life with God to be like a picnic. They want a small, manageable god who will just deliver prosperity and comfort. They don't want to strive with God. They don't want to wrestle with God. *We* don't want to be stretched and challenged with difficult teachings that make us uncomfortable. Jesus knows this about *us*, as surely as he knew this about *them*.

And just like he and Joshua did at Jacob's well in Shechem; Jesus confronts his faithful disciples with a choice. Do we trust Jesus enough to wrestle with him? Are we willing to serve Christ in sincerity and in faithfulness, even when it stretches and challenges us? Are we ready to turn from the lesser gods who seek our attention and loyalty in order to follow the way—the *example*—of Jesus Christ?

Jesus asks his most dedicated disciples the most heart-rending question in the New Testament. "Do you also wish to go away?"

In the pregnant silence...the twelve disciples knew they were facing the moment of truth. They knew they had to choose *that day* whom they would serve. God bless St. Peter who led the way for those remaining twelve disciples out of 5000. "Lord, to whom *can we* go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

May we discover the strength and courage *in our own day* to choose like St. Peter...to speak out like St. Peter...to lead other disciples like St. Peter...and to follow the way of Jesus like St. Peter.

Amen.