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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Joshua 24:1-2, 13-18, Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-69
Choose! And Fear Not!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about choice. I call it “Choose! And Fear Not!” Let me begin with a verse from this morning’s Epistle Lesson. St. Paul writes this:

¹³Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, *to stand*. (Ephesians 6:13, RSV)

There is a wonderful tone of confidence in this passage. St. Paul believes that Christians can array themselves in divine armor. We can don the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation. We can stand there glorious with the sunshine flashing off our armor, like some knight of the Round Table of old. But not only this: not only does St. Paul believe that we can array ourselves in divine armor, but also he believes that we can then go on to conquer the enemy. We can trample Satan down, along with all sin, lust, covetousness, and vice. We can weather many a storm, many a temptation, many a suffering, many a disappointment, and when all is said and done and the storm is passed, we can be found standing:

...and having done all, *to stand*.

Ahh, but all of this standing, after all such conflict, begins with a choice. It is as Joshua says in our First Lesson

...*choose* this day whom you will serve (Joshua 24:15, RSV)

Each of this morning’s Bible Lessons is about choice. It might be a subject that brings some sadness to us. When we survey our past, we might hang our heads and say, “I have chosen many good things in the past. I have made good resolutions. I have entered upon the good path with firm determination. Yet for all my resolve, I have failed. I made the good choice, but I did not follow through.”

Let us look, then, at this morning’s readings to try to get some help with this matter of choice.

A NATURAL FLOW TO THE READINGS

There is a natural flow to this morning's Bible Lessons: Our First Lesson issues the call to make a choice in life: "choose this day whom you will serve." Our Gospel Lesson, then, gives us an illustration of people making such a choice: I mean the Twelve Disciples of Jesus. They choose to walk with Jesus when so many others turn and walk away. But it is our Epistle Lesson that especially intrigues me. This Epistle Lesson is important because it teaches us that we can in fact do this thing: we can in fact choose to walk with the Lord, as did the Twelve Disciples long ago. We might have made many choices in life in the past, but failed to follow through. But this choice we can make and follow it through all the way to heaven.

CHOOSE!

Let's begin with our First Lesson. Someday, the good Lord willing, I will preach a sermon like this First Lesson to you dear people of Immanuel Lutheran Church. It is Joshua's final sermon. It is his farewell discourse. He had followed a mighty man, Moses. He had followed Moses as best he could as leader of the people. Now, he is old and his preaching days are coming to an end. But my! What a farewell sermon he preaches! Time is running out. There is no time left for digressions or speculations or wandering words. It is time to go to the heart of the matter. And with God's grace Joshua manages to do so. He powerfully puts into words the final thoughts of his heart. His farewell discourse includes this earnest appeal:

¹⁵And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 25:15, RSV)

Choose! he says. Choose this day! Do not delay until tomorrow, for tomorrow is pledged to no man. Choose this day, for tomorrow might be too late.

Scholars say that in the early days of the church, some people delayed baptism till their deathbed. They were drawn to Christ. They wanted to walk with him. And I bet they did, as best they could. But they put off baptism till the end of their lives, hoping to enter heaven entirely washed and innocent. They feared that if they were baptized young, it would give them too long a stretch of life to remain pure. They feared that they would yield to sin, bit by bit, and thereby soil their souls. So, they tried to time things right, delaying baptism to the last moment.

It is a dangerous game to play, of course, for life is entirely too unpredictable for that. How numerous are the sudden ways in which we can die: We poor humans fall off cliffs, get gunned down on the streets, have heart attacks, fall from scaffolds, drown in riptides, succumb to strokes and pneumonia, get blown away

in hurricanes or tornadoes, get crushed in earthquakes. Our modern technology can control a lot of things, but not everything. None of us can be confident of tomorrow, and so none of us can afford to delay choosing Christ until tomorrow.

But there is another side to this poor strategy. Something else ails it. The problem is not simply that it is hard to know the day of our death. There is the deeper problem that *we need* baptism here and now. If we delay baptism till the deathbed, we thereby forfeit the help that baptism would have given us along the way. This is a theme I mean to develop later in this sermon, when I discuss our Epistle Lesson.

Meanwhile, let me go on a bit more with Joshua's appeal to "choose this day whom you will serve." I am persuaded that there is such a thing as a Christian doctrine of choice. It means that Christians need not face choice with the same kind of fear we would have if we did not believe in the triune God. I am trying to reckon with this phenomenon: sometimes we fail to choose *this day* because we are frightened that we will make the wrong choice. We are mindful that to choose one path in life is to forgo many other paths, and we worry that we might be forgoing the wrong paths. That is, we do not fear simply that we will fail in the path we choose; we fear also that we might succeed! But that in succeeding, we will have left a more perfect choice behind us. So, we delay. Today passes. So does tomorrow. And of course, to delay is also to make a choice. Delaying means that other opportunities are slipping through our fingers.

But you are a Christian, so I repeat the call of Joshua to us: Choose this day! Go ahead and do it. Naturally you must use the good sense that God has given you. You must do your research, search your heart, and seek counsel. But when you have done such things, then go ahead and choose this day. But here is your advantage: because you believe in the triune God, you can add to your choice the prayer that the Lord will make your choice to be a good one for you. You can pray that the Lord of past, present, and future will receive your choice, take charge of it, and use it for the building up of his kingdom and for the benefit of you and your loved ones here on earth.

We do not need to be omniscient in making our choices, for we are trusting ourselves to a God who is omniscient and loving toward us always.

And in this one particular choice, I am quite confident that we can go ahead and dash headlong into it: we can choose this day to serve the Lord. It will be good for us and good for our neighbors for us to make that choice. The sooner the better!

THE TWELVE

Next, let us take a quick look at our Gospel Lesson. It presents to us a picture of folks who have made their choice whether to follow Jesus. Many of the early followers of Jesus had decided against Jesus. They have sized him up as best they can. They think his preaching is hard to understand, and perhaps they sense that there is an air of tragedy about this man, that he seems ready to sacrifice himself

for the sake of others, and that perhaps he will ask them to follow his manner of life. We cannot know the multitude of reasons why so many people forsake Jesus. But it does seem that the walking away of so many former disciples has brought discouragement to Jesus. So, he turns to the Twelve and asks them a soul-searching question: will they also leave him:

⁶⁷Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

And Peter, God bless him! speaks up for the Twelve:

⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

Peter has no clear knock-down argument for his choice. He does not speak of mathematics or experimental method or statistical probabilities. He simply says what he has come to believe. Ahh, but what he has come to believe is worth everything. He believes that Jesus has the words of eternal life and that Jesus is the Holy One of God. This is what he believes, whether he can prove it or not. But this is what he believes, and so he makes his choice: he means to walk with Jesus henceforth.

OUR EPISTLE LESSON

Now, let’s take a look at our Epistle Lesson. The thing that strikes me in this Lesson is St. Paul’s tone of confidence that we can succeed in following Jesus. This is one choice that is not too high for us. It does not outstretch our doing. Why? Because a Champion fights at our side, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

We face a wily opponent, true. That’s why the apostle urges us to use the weapons of the Spirit available to us. We should be people of the Word, of prayer, of peace, of faith because we face a great enemy:

¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

The devil does not want us to walk with Jesus. The devil does not have many high ambitions left in life. He fought with Jesus and lost. His fate is sealed. He is heading to hell. But he is not there yet, and till his end comes, he still has some bitter hopes and dreams. He wants nothing more than to destroy us. He cannot save himself. All he can do is acquire companions to march along with him on his

path to hell. So, he does that. He uses craft and dreadful might to try to ruin souls! And you have to give him some credit: he is never lazy about his job. He wants to destroy the likes of you and me, and he is up and at it. Why, I bet we can almost feel him work -- sometimes with hot fires of temptations, sometimes with the gentle strings and winds and caresses by which he tries to lure us onto the rocks.

St. Paul knew all about this. Yet in our Bible reading, he seems unperturbed. He seems confident that every Christian, both strong and weak, rich and poor, fancy or simple, is capable of doing what the Twelve did: they resolved to walk with Jesus. They believed in him and set out after him day by day. Others left Jesus, but they did not. Paul believes that we can be like them. We can take our place in the apostolic fellowship.

I believe that Paul's confidence about us is based on the resurrection of Jesus. It is his Easter faith that makes him so bold. After all, if Jesus is alive and kicking, it has got to make a difference in this world. When it comes to the matter of choice, the resurrection of Jesus means that the good man who defeated Satan back on the cross is alive and ready to defeat him again in your life and in my life. Satan is a wily enemy, true, but no match for the Champion who walks at our side if we are willing.

So Paul figures that we can make our choice for Christ and take our stand with him. Not only does he believe that we can *take our stand*, but we can actually do it. We can *stand*. We do not need to be knocked down by the devil. We have good weapons for the battle:

¹³Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, *to stand*. ¹⁴Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; ¹⁶besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. ¹⁷And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

St. John Chrysostom picks up this theme of confidence. He urges us to trample Satan underneath:

...that when we depart to that world, we may not be convicted of *betraying* that power which God hath given us (Homily on Ephesians 6)

Here is the summit of the whole argument: let us walk on with Christ that "we may not be convicted of betraying that power which God hath given us." What power? Why, the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the gift of Baptism. That is why

it is such a sad waste to put off baptism till the deathbed. It is sad to put it off because we need the power even now, day by day in this earthly life.

But you might still wonder what power this is. You might say, “True, I am baptized. But I do not *feel* any more powerful than I did beforehand.” But, my dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, let us not underestimate ourselves. Here, I urge us -- not just you, but also me -- to trust not to what we can see or feel, but simply to the Word of God. And the Word of God teaches us that we have more strength than we might have imagined, for we have Christ with us and in us. Earlier in this book of Ephesians, St. Paul refers to our God whose power works *in us*:

²⁰Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to *the power that worketh in us*, ²¹Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.
(Ephesians 3:20-21, KJV)

Likewise, St. Paul asks in another place, Who can be against us, if God be for us? Why, even Satan must yield before this blessed saying:

³¹What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31, KJV)

It is the less the angel spoke to Mary long ago concerning her kinswoman Elizabeth:

³⁶And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. ³⁷For with God nothing shall be impossible. (Luke 1:36-37, KJV)

And to the frightened father,

²¹And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. ²²And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. ²³Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, *all things are possible to him that believeth*. ²⁴And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. (Mark 9:21-24, KJV)

Altogether, when St. Paul in this morning's reading urges us to be “strong in the Lord,” he is serious. He is urging each us to do something that he simply believes lies within our power:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. (Ephesians 6:10, RSV)

You and I know much about the wiles of the devil. We know his particular points of attack for us. We know where our soul is vulnerable. We know where we are weak. Let us fortify ourselves, then. Let us wrestle with the devil's darkness by becoming light. Let us resist the devil's wickedness by seeking to become ever more good. Let us pray for God's help, like the disciples running to Jesus and asking for his help. And let us not betray the freedom and the Spirit granted to us in Baptism by not even trying to be good. Go ahead! Let us choose this day to serve the Lord. Let us choose Christ and be not afraid, for we walk with him who is the Conqueror of sin, death, and the devil, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.