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**“Choose This Day...”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)
November 12, 2017
Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25**

Thirty-five thousand. That is the average number of times research shows that we make decisions each day. Thirty-five thousand times. I am exhausted just thinking about it! Fortunately, the vast majority of those decisions are made subconsciously. According to research out of Columbia University, only about 70 of those decisions are conscious choices.

Some years ago, Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his partner Amos Tversky developed the concept of System One and System Two thinking. System One thinking is intuitive, subconscious thinking – the kind we do without really realizing we are doing it at all. System Two thinking is conscious thinking, the kind that causes us to stop and weigh the balance of our choices in order to decide what we will do, or say, how we will act or think. Apparently, writes one author, “there is a constant interplay between the two systems and the brain is

frugal with its cognitive capacity, so wherever possible it will hand over decision making to System 1.”¹

I believe that Joshua, in today’s passage, was trying to get the Israelites to use their System Two thinking in relation to their decision to worship God.

As he prepares for his own death, Joshua calls upon the Israelites to make a System 2 decision – a conscious, daily choice that will determine who they will be – the decision to serve God alone. As he draws them toward this major life-choice, he reminds them of their long history of God watching over them and keeping God’s promises to them. From Terah to Abraham and beyond, God has kept covenant with the Israelites, formed them into a Holy people, and given them the Promised Land. Joshua reminds them of God’s words to them in verse 13: “I have given you a land for which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.” In other words, God is saying, “Everything you have, I have given you.”

¹ David Coleiro, Strategic North, “Do you truly understand how human decision making is impacting your brand, July 12, 2016, <http://www.strategiconorth.com/blog/2016/07/12/how-do-humans-make-decisions-and-how-do-those-decisions-lead-to-actions/> (November 8, 2017).

“Now therefore, revere the Lord, [Joshua said] 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 wanted the people to understand that their God, Yahweh, was not willing to be one of a collection of gods. God was not interested in being added to an *old* list of gods that their ancestors had served. Nor was God interested in being added to a *new* list of gods served by the Amorites and the people of this new territory. Joshua reminds the Israelites of the first commandment that Moses had given their ancestors not long ago, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; **you shall have no other gods before me.**” Not one of many, said Joshua. *The one. The only.* Yahweh. God alone.

The people of God were standing at the juncture of past and present and future. Through Joshua, God reminds the people from whence they have come. In doing so, God reminds them of God’s continued presence with them in their days ahead.

God behind us. God before us. God with us.

In calling the people to choose God, Joshua calls for the kind of faith that “confesses that it is none other than the very creator of heaven and earth who constitutes our true desire, so that only when our hearts rest in God can our restlessness be ended and satisfied.”² Choosing God leads to fullness and wholeness of life. Choosing God brings us back into full communion with our Creator and with creation. Joshua knows that there is only one real choice that will bring joy and peace and life.

The psalmist in Psalm 73 knows about making this choice each day. He writes, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you” (v.25).

Reformer John Calvin knows this great desire for God alone as well:

I know that [you] by [yourself], apart from every other object, [are] sufficient, [yes], more than sufficient for me, and therefore I do not suffer myself to be carried away after a variety of desires, but rest in and am fully contented with [you]. In short, that we may be satisfied with God alone, it

² Brueggemann, p. 41.

is of importance for us to know the plentitude of the blessings which he offers for our acceptance (*my modern translation*).³

I find it interesting that the final version of today's text actually comes from the time of the Babylonian exile. Hundreds of years after the people entered the Promised Land. Hundreds of years after their prosperity, the people of God found themselves exiled from their homeland and sent into a strange and foreign land with other gods and plenty of other temptations. "Choose this day . . ." God said through Joshua. Those words weren't just for the Israelites in their newly conquered land. Those words were for the Israelites wherever they were, even if they were in another land. Even if their lives weren't as powerful and as peachy as before. The call to faithfulness was the same. "Choose this day . . ." Are you a part of this covenant for the long haul, or not?

Here is where the text gains meaning for us in this day and age. The call to faithfulness to the covenant God has made with us is not new. It is a part of God's history with us. God has kept God's side of the covenant and even expanded it through Jesus to include folk like you and me. So now the imperative extends to us and the choice is one of those System 2 decisions we should make today and

³ As quoted in Walter Brueggemann's *The Covenanted Self*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 40. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Volume Second* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 155

every day. Each morning - you know, before we decide whether or not to get out of bed - before we hit the snooze button a few times - even before our feet hit those slippers, we need to be saying these words again to ourselves: *Choose this day whom you will serve.* Will it be the God of our ancestors who offers us fullness of life and peace and wholeness, even in the midst of sickness, injury, or tragedy? Or will it be the gods of the world that surround us with promises of instant gratification? Will it be the god of consumerism? The god of the athletic complex? The god of big guns and redemptive violence? The god of politics? What is it in this world that takes up our time and guides our decisions? Is it God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer? Or have we given into the System One decisions that subconsciously lead us to other little-g gods in which we put our trust?

You see, friends, this one choice affects everything in our lives – the way we raise our children, the type of checks we write, whether we do our jobs and live our lives with integrity, the kind of friend we are to others, how we spend our time, how we care for those in need, how we respond to violence and oppression, how we deal with our own suffering. This one choice affects all other choices. So

God invites us to choose this day who we will be and whose we will be. God has chosen us. Will we choose God?

Fred Craddock tells the story of when he was around twenty-years-old, full of knowledge, confidence, and ready to take on the theological world. He had read Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* and, in his words, found Schweitzer's Christology "woefully lacking – more water than wine." Craddock marked up his copy, wrote in all the margins, and jotted down numerous questions. Then one day he read in the Knoxville News-Sentinel that Albert Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland, Ohio. He would be playing the dedicatory concert for a new organ in a big church up there. Following the recital, he would meet folks in the church hall for conversation and reflection.

Craddock made up his mind right away. He bought a Greyhound bus ticket and headed north for the concert. On the way up, he studied his copy of Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* and on separate paper, made a list of questions, along with page number references. He would be prepared to grill the author on his watered-down Christology. Craddock remembers the night well:

I went there; I heard the concert; I rushed into the fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row, and waited with my lap of questions. After a while he came in, shaggy hair, big white moustache, stooped, and seventy-five years old. He had played a marvelous concert. You know, he was master organist, medical doctor, philosopher, biblical scholar, lecturer, writer, everything. He came in with a cup of tea and some refreshments and stood in front of the group, and there I was, close. Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: "You've been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station at Lambarene. If there's anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?"

I looked down at my questions [Craddock writes]; they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be Christian and had hopes that I could be that someday.⁴

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 125-126

Choose this day.

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