

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Where, How, and When”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 26, 2012**

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10–20; Matthew 7:8–9

Joshua is about to hang up his walking stick as Israel's wilderness leader. His mission has been accomplished. His call as Israel's leader is complete. He has led them across the Jordan into the promised land where they have occupied Jericho and the surrounding territory, captured the hill country surrounding Bethel and Gibeon from which they were able to see and conquer the lowlands around Lachish, and finally to turn northwards and take the urban centers anchored by Hazor. They have spent the last 40 years as wilderness people under the leadership of Moses and Aaron first, and then Joshua, of late. And these are some of Joshua's final words to them before he hangs it up for good. This is his farewell discourse to them at the end of their 40-year journey through many dangers, toils and snares.

Following the example of Moses, whose final act of leadership also was a call to covenant renewal, Joshua reminds the Israelites to look *back* to the nascent years of Terah, Abraham and Nahor, of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, when they were only a family, not yet a people, but still a family called to a unique orientation, an orientation towards Yahweh God, instead of towards the plurality of popular gods.

This God, Yahweh, he reminds them, whom alone they have been called to serve,
is a flagrantly giving God, an effusively generous God,
who has given the children of Israel land, descendants,
victory over enemies, blessings, food, freedom and freedom of choice.

The verb "to give" is the lynchpin of Joshua's recital of Yahweh's attributes;
without it, Yahweh's reputation rings hollow.

And so first, Joshua reminds his people *to look back* from whence they have come
and remember who has formed them, who has led them,
who has rescued them from Egyptian bondage,
who has delivered them and brought them safely
to this point in time,
and who has made good his promise *to gift them* with this land.

And then Joshua encourages them *to look forward* to the future that lies before them,
to the possibilities that lie before them, to the choices that lie before them,
and to remember this day whom they have served in the past,
and to choose this day whom they will serve today and henceforth
into the future.

I am reminded of the signpost that marks one of my favorite little hiking trails
in the Appalachian mountains near Asheville:

two opposing arrows on the signpost indicate the directions to "Hither and "Yon."
Joshua, the leader whose mantra always has been "be strong and of good courage"
now makes a plea to them in strong encouragement
of continued faithfulness to the one who has been steadfastly
faithful to them since the beginning.

At this crossroads of "Hither and Yon," who will it be, he asks his people:
the God who has chosen you as his most precious possession
or the gods whom others will choose for you?

The journalism student in me wants to search for the who, what, when, where, why,
and how of Joshua's last words.

And the Godly Play devotee in me wants to ask "the wonder questions" about

Joshua's last words to Israel concerning their faith.

I wonder when, where, and how the children of Israel are going to choose to serve the Lord
in this new territory they now find themselves occupying.

I wonder if Joshua's speech to the children of Israel relates to us today.

I wonder where First Presbyterian Church might fit in this story about transitions
as we begin a new school year and step forward into the unknown.

As poet Mary Oliver would say, "What is it you (we) plan to do with your (our)
one wild and precious life?" Our one wild and precious ministry?

Our one wild and precious calling?

(Mary Oliver. *The Summer Day*, from New and Selected Poems, 1992)

I notice that Joshua pretty much answers the who, what, and why questions for his people
with his recital of Israel's past history with Yahweh

and with his own bold personal pledge of allegiance—

"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (v. 15),

which he hopes will elicit a similar bold statement of commitment from them...

which it does!

But what he leaves to their imaginations, and to ours, as he prepares

to take leave of them as their leader are the answers to the

where, how, and when questions of faith.

And so I thought we might mull these over for ourselves because they seem

to be questions of *the particular* where the rubber meets the road.

So I will give you three little vignettes from the particular of the now

to elicit your personal and our corporate response to these "wonder questions."

Wonder Question #1:

As for us and our household, "where" will we serve the Lord?

It seems that just when I think my primary ministry

is here to the members of our congregation

or that our primary ministry is to the people of downtown Durham,

something invariably happens to turn that upside down.

You will recall that three weeks ago today,

a terrible tragedy occurred in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

A lone gunman, an avowed white supremacist,

walked into a Sikh Gurdwara or place of worship

and opened fire, killing 6 members of the gurdwara, including the president

of the gurdwara, who tried to stop him with a butter knife,

and a police officer outside, before turning

the gun on himself.

It was traumatizing to the Sikh community there, and to Sikh communities everywhere,

who feel marginalized by the dominant culture around them.

The Sikh Gurdwara of North Carolina, which happens to be here in Durham,

held a worship service and candlelight prayer vigil on Wednesday evening

following the shooting and invited all people of faith in the Triangle

to stand together in solidarity against these acts of hatred and violence.

Hedge and I went, not knowing what to expect, accompanied by a few

other Presbyterians who were willing to take off their shoes, cover their heads,

sit on the floor, and be part of their worship service of

grieving and of hope.

The Sikh community could not have been more gracious and hospitable

in opening their doors and their hearts and exposing the hurt

and fear therein.

Our Durham community leaders were there, including Mayor Bill Bell

and City Councilman Mike Woodard, among others.

And Rabbi John Friedman was there with numerous members from Judea Reform,

and a few Muslims were there, even though it was Ramadan,

and they were supposed to be fasting until after sundown.

The Jews and the Muslims know how it feels to be objectified,

made targets of discrimination and hatred,

and recipients of random acts of violence, *so they showed up.*

The Jains and the Bahais were there, too, but I was disappointed

at the small number of Christians who were present.

Perhaps they were not aware. Perhaps they did not want to pull themselves away from their own Wednesday night programs of fellowship.

Perhaps they did not connect the dots between an act of violence in Wisconsin and the fearful, yet faithful response of minority faith communities in our own state.

But I was embarrassed by the Christian lack of response to our Sikh brothers and sisters. Where will we be called to serve?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you might recall, came to the United States in June 1939 to avoid the compulsory military service and the required oath of allegiance which he would have had to swear to the Nazi German state at that time.

But once ensconced in New York at Union Seminary, where he had acquired a teaching post, Bonhoeffer realized that his call to ministry was not here in the safety of the US.

He admitted in a letter to his friend, Eberhard Bethge,

“You may be working over there (in Germany), and I may be working in America, but are we both only where he (Christ) is?

He brings us together. Or have I missed the place where he is?

Where is he for me? No, God, says, 'You are my servant.'”

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer stayed in New York only 26 days before returning to Germany, to serve out his ministry in the midst of the Nazi violence and mayhem.

(Eric Metaxas. *Bonhoeffer*, p. 327)

Jesus wandered all over the periphery of Israel, seeking the company of the likes of Samaritans, Syro-phonicians, tax collectors, women of ill-repute, and gamey children.

He sought God in the strangest places, the places no good Jew would dare to venture.

Perhaps when some Christians tend to isolate themselves, our call is otherwise, to allow God to scatter us like seeds, disregarding the soil.

Wonder Question #2:

As for us and our household, “how” will we serve the Lord?

One of our church members called me this week and asked me to come and see her

because it has been a long time since we talked.

She has suffered extremely from pain in recent months and has not been able to be present for worship.

I didn't know when she called if something were wrong, or if she just might be lonely, or if she might be thinking that we had neglected her.

I always knock on the door with great trepidation when responding to this kind of call, never knowing if I'm going to be welcomed with open arms or with a tongue lashing and then open arms.

So I knocked softly on the door with my good arm before stepping across her threshold. "Oh, you came so soon," she said. "I thought it would take a while for you to respond."

Uh-oh, I thought, here it comes!

But it didn't play out in the way I had dreaded.

She was wonderfully warm and conversant, a different person than the one I had met writhing in pain a few weeks before.

When I asked her "how" she was doing, not expecting much response other than "fine" or "better" or even a litany of woes,

she paused for a moment to collect her thoughts and then began quoting scripture to me.

"Do not be anxious about anything," she said, "but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

It was like Linus pausing to quote the Lukan birth narrative in the midst of the chaotic hubbub of the secularized Christmas play.

It was a moment pure and simple like that. A moment of sublime clarity.

She added that she is trying to let go of *her plans* for her future and rely on God to dwell in her heart and mind and give her peace, that everything will work out for the good.

I was floored by her devotion.

I was floored that she had chosen to serve God, even in her suffering, by committing these words to memory and using them for strength

and orientation.

I was floored that she had chosen to serve God by living in God's word,
regardless of one's life circumstance.

I was floored as a likewise limited person, down to one non-dominant arm,
that I had not thought to take that path myself.

Jesus said, "Knock, and the door will be opened to you."

Sometimes I think we knock on all the wrong doors before we finally find
the one that leads to our peace and our healing.

Wonder Question #3:

As for us and our household, "when" will we serve the Lord?

A few weeks ago, we held a Service of Witness to the Resurrection in our sanctuary
for long-time member Hilda Bradshaw, who died at age 81.

Hilda, as you know, was quite a character: a little sprite of a red-headed woman
who loved people and loved to greet people who came to church.

If the church doors were open, Hilda was here greeting people.

It was a lovely and fitting funeral service honoring Hilda's life and legacy,
marking the completion of her baptism in dying with Christ
and the beginning of her resurrection in rising with Christ.

I had to laugh, though, as we walked Hilda out of the church following the funeral,
down the front steps, to the hearse waiting for her outside on Main Street.

Her son-in-law, Charlie, met us out there, and he chuckled as he relayed
what Hilda was probably thinking at this moment.

He said, "She's probably saying, with a twinkle in her eye,
'Just look at me now! Aren't they all treating me like I'm somebody special!'"

And she was. And all of God's children should be treated like they are somebody
special, in life, in death, and on the threshold of resurrection life.

When will we and our household serve the Lord?

I would like to think that we will serve the Lord by being present as living
witnesses to the resurrection at all funerals,

whether we know the person who has died or not.

Because at that point, it's really not about that person.

Rather, it is about what Christ has done for all believers,

honoring each one of us as "special" to him,

worthy of being raised with him by grace alone, by faith alone.

Tom Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, says,

"A good funeral is a work of the whole church, the communion of saints,

and it announces that we do not pass through the valley

of the shadow of death alone.

People should sit together at a funeral, mourning families surrounded by others,

and a good funeral allows for the voices of the congregation to be heard in the

service in prayer, lesson, song, and creed."

(Tom Long. *Accompany Them with Singing*, p. 138)

A congregation stands by a grieving family

as a sign and an affirmation of this faith that we profess,

that in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,

we will all be changed and the dead will be raised imperishable,

immortal, victorious over sin, disease and death, clothed in eternity.

And when a family who is grieving over the loss of the loved one asks,

"Who can believe this stuff?" we and our household are there to stand by them

and to say with our very presence, "This, we believe."

Choose this day whom we will serve, where we will serve,

how we will serve, and when we will serve.

Look back to the past, then look forward to the future, and choose for God. Amen.