

“Go Chasing Waterfalls”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
November 8, 2020  
Virtual Worship

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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25  
Amos 5:18-24

Our Joshua reading today occurs on the other side of the Jordan river from those days of wandering through the wilderness for 40 years. Here, it is time to renew the covenant the people have made with God, a covenant that gets renewed over, and over, and over again. From the promises made to Abraham, to the covenant cut into stone and into flesh at Sinai, to the covenant Moses renewed with the people before they crossed the River Jordan into the promised land, to the covenant Joshua recites with the people once they are settled in Canaan as we hear today, the covenant between God and God's people is one that gets repeated, reminded, restored, and reclaimed. That is because the covenant is something the people of God could not quite live up to. They would fail, they did fail, and they will fail.

I wonder how well we can live up to the covenant, too. Joshua clearly instructs us, “*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.” But if you were at the church yesterday afternoon, you would have seen on our church lawn that the trees were wrapped in gold, maroon, and white garland. Colorful saris danced and bobbed like wildflowers. Characters from Hindu mythology brought ancient stories to life. Children produced clay lamps they painted by hand, and lanterns nested beneath every tree as twilight neared. The Indian festival of Diwali, celebrated by several religions in South Asia, came upon us to honor the triumph of good over evil and light over darkness.

Some might ask: does offering our church space for this festival, and participating in its ceremonies, break the covenant God set before the newly settled Israelites? A stringent reading of the Hebrew bible might say so. Like the Hebrews who had crossed the Jordan to find not an empty land, but a land long-settled by the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Jebusites, and the Perizzites. Along with their tribes and cultures came their gods. Similarly, in and around Leonia, we live as a people among many tribes and cultures, and also gods-- but that is something we celebrate more than fear, because it is something that has enriched the life of our church. We would not be here, we would not have lasted, at the Presbyterian Church in Leonia were it not for the worshippers who come from many places, some Christian and some new to Christianity. Our day at the end of winter, when we celebrate the Lunar New Year, embraces the Asian cultures that have made us more robust as a people of God.

But for the Israelites, strict rules against other gods helped them to build a wall and define themselves as distinctly set apart by the cultures around them. This distinction ensured their survival.

Joshua gives an impressive mythology of the Hebrews coming out of 40 years into the wilderness, and entering Canaan by storm. First aided by a prostitute who shelters Hebrew spies from the king's armies, Joshua and his troops continue into the Promised Land, toppling the walls of Jericho; ambushing the city of Ai, massacring the 5 kings of the Negeb, and wiping out the Anakim from Hebron to the hills of Judah. One of our newest participants at the church, Jared Kirby, is by profession a combat instructor for stage and screen. I can only imagine the scenes he could create with his son Evan if we asked them to act out Joshua.

But biblical scholars suggest that this version is not historical to what really happened-- that is, the Hebrews came into a land as a quite vulnerable group among many cultures and well-established rulers, and tried their best at survival for a few hundred years, without being crushed by the dominant cultures around them. Their tales of exploit were more like the fantasy of the underdog, as they longed for victory, legitimacy, and establishment.

I confess to having some of those underdog fantasies about vanquishing enemies these past days and the weeks leading up to them, as our nation set its course in democratic elections. I imagine that for many voters of either candidate, your longing may have been so deep that you could almost taste it.

Joshua paints these Hebrews as conquerors, but I imagine them more like the marginalized people whom no one notices, or some scorn, until they become a swell that just cannot be ignored-- much like most groups in this country move from obscurity to relevance, or at least hope to do so. The truth is, making it to some imagined promised land is never the end of the story. What matters most is *how you act once you arrive*.

As for the lure of foreign gods, of course this was a threat in Joshua's time, as the Hebrews had to define themselves distinctly from the cultures around them lest they get subsumed by them. That is not our struggle as Protestant Christians in America... well, not exactly. You see, our threat is not that we get swallowed up by the rituals and traditions of other religions. Our false gods of today have nothing to do with Vishnu or Shiva. Their names are much more familiar than that. Here is how Christians are seen by outsiders as failing at our calling:

- Choosing **corruption** over *character*
- Loving **money** over *mercy*
- Serving **self-interest** over *self-sacrifice*
- Offering **hostility** rather than *hospitality*

You might say these are the gods whom we are seen as worshipping, rather than the Christ who calls us into love of God and love of neighbor.

Whether you were joyful, or you were devastated by yesterday's election results, we Christians clearly have work to do to make our witness relevant to our community and worthy of our calling. Our work is not to be abandoned once elections are complete. Joshua makes it clear that simply arriving in the Promised Land is not enough. If we try to coast on our own laurels, then we don't deserve them. No, instead we must make a daily choice, and that choice must be for God.

Amos also prophesied a judgmental word, so if you are listening while reclined on your sofa at home, go ahead and squirm a little; you likely have much more cushion than the less forgiving wooden pews.

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies," warned The Lord, who was clearly also not impressed by the dripping offerings of fatted animals or even the melody of the harps. The reason these ritual actions had become so scorned by God was because, Amos tells us earlier in the chapter, these same people who are showing off their faithfulness are trampling on the poor, taking bribes, and pushing away the needy at the gate.

I had a professor in college, Dr. Tina Pippin, who would make a covenant with each student at the beginning of class as to what grade they would make. The boldest among us might contract for an A. But then we had to list the work we would do, and the quality of our work, in order to earn that A: how many books we would read, how many pages in essays we would write, what kind of class presentations we would make, and what our overall quality of work would be. Partway through the semester, our professor would call us in to meet with her, to look at the learning covenant the student had made with her. She might say, "You have done all the assignments you contracted for, but your effort is B-level. Would you like to re-contract for a B, or would you like to rewrite our covenant to show how you will get A work?" Some of my friends were so intimidated at the prospects of that meeting, that they would covenant for a lesser grade than they would normally earn.

But there is no reason for us to aim low. If God made a covenant with us, once and for all, we would all fail, and our relationship and its benefit would be forgotten. The reason God renewed the covenant, time and time again, is because God knew we would fail, but still *wanted* us to succeed. Through Amos, God promised a day of darkness and gloom. This is what Israel was working towards on their end of the contract or covenant. But God was offering something else: the chance to renew for something so much better than darkness, greed, and corruption.

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream!" God tells us through Amos. Here we see and touch the deep desire, the deep thirst, that belongs to God: it is not for fancy rituals or expensive offerings. It is for a deep love of neighbor; mercy for the meek, and a goodness that is reflective of God.

Paul understood the church in Corinth lived in a culture that worshiped many gods. Still, he did not find a problem with Christians participating in and eating the food sacrificed at festivals to other gods; he said, "anyone who loves God is known by God; love builds up." I believe that in

our welcome, our church modeled love yesterday that builds up community in a time when we have known deep divisions. Without words, we represented our God with integrity. And, we found similar yearnings from our different faiths. I realized, through my participation in Diwali, some words by the Christian liberator in South Africa, Desmond Tutu, could actually also be fitting lyrics for a Diwali song:

Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death.

As we get settled into the coming year and the leadership it brings, let us not forget that God calls us to goodness. God calls us to love. God shows us how to make light in the darkness. God calls us into life, even in the face of death. Let that be our orientation as we cross into this new time. Let us renew and restore that covenant. Amen.