

November 8, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Joshua 24:1–3, 14–25](#)

TITLE: Joshua Moments

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

There is an easy message waiting to be spoken this morning. There's a message that I know will fall on largely sympathetic ears—a message of being able to breathe again, believe again, hope again. A celebratory message about a historic election—of a new president-elect and the first woman, the first woman of color as vice president elect. It's a message about resilience—about black women persevering, about women of color fighting for change, about young people working for justice, about people in Pennsylvania believing in our better angels and trusting tomorrow can be a better day. There was dancing in Squirrel Hill, on Carson Street, in Oakland and Downtown. I don't want to take anything away from any of that—any of this historic, amazing, powerful moment.

But an easy message is not a sermon. I watched MSNBC, ABC, and Fox News last night, like many of you. I scrolled Facebook and Instagram and Google, like many of you. The word for this morning builds on some of what was spoken last night and relies on some of the images we saw in yesterday's celebrations. But the focus of this sermon is not on last Tuesday and not on Saturday just past. The focus is on this moment—this the Lord's Day—and what tomorrow means for us. Our conversation partner is not Kamala or Joe, but rather Joshua.

So let's begin with a reality check. Despite all the media fuss and hand-wringing over the election, the truth is that nothing has fundamentally changed in America. Ours is a nation of tremendous resources, able to meet everyone's needs if we manage them generously and justly. Ours is a land of amazing beauty if we preserve and protect it faithfully. But conversely ours is a country where racial strife, economic inequity, drug addiction and health care deficiencies touch every American family in one way or another. These good news-bad news realities are not going away without concentrated, dedicated faithful action from every one of us from here to the White House. We find ourselves in what I'd characterize as a "Joshua Moment"—a moment that requires us to focus, to take a deep breath, and consciously choose whom we will follow from this day forth.

Life is full of turning points. Some of them are negative ones like mid-life crises, job losses, or facing a divorce. Others are positive, like leaving home to head off to college, celebrating a new marriage, the birth of a child, or a promotion in a career that excites us. Yet in every turning point, the same sky is above us, the same earth is below us, and the same person looks back at us in the mirror. All that is different is that we stand at a crossroad. One foot is raised in the air and we must consciously, intentionally decide in which direction we're going to step next. In these moments, it's as if we hear a voice saying, "Choose now what is important to you; choose what gives your life meaning, what makes sense for you and all those you love in this world." These are

Joshua moments and the voice is saying “Choose this day whom you will serve; choose who is your God.”

Joshua spoke those words long ago in the Shechem valley. Around him were people who traced their roots back to Abraham and Sarah of old, who had endured years of slavery in Egypt but now stood on the cusp of freedom. There they were, the 12 tribes of Joseph, Judah, Ephraim, Benjamin and others. They stood there hopeful yet flawed, with a long history of worshiping false idols, of breaking the commandments and grumbling against God while wandering in the wilderness. They stood there once more being asked to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, strength and soul.

And honestly, aren't things the same today? Here we are, not in the Shechem valley but in the Mon Valley, people of Allegheny County plus Beaver, Butler, Westmoreland and Fayette counties, people of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, New York, all 50 tribes of America. Joshua doesn't mince words. He tells us to unpack our baggage. We do so, proudly remembering our American heritage: a democratic constitution and bill of rights, a long history of innovation, generosity, and global leadership. Yet beside those things, we also see the false idols from our past: slave trading dating back to 1619, crumpled treaties made with Native American peoples, carefully folded white Klan robes, old signs saying No Irish Need Apply, No Votes for Women, Immigrants Go Home, maps designating Japanese internment camps, photos of a burning Cuyahoga River, abandoned homes near Love Canal and warning signs around Three Mile Island.

Joshua doesn't let us stop there. He calls out a second time and tells us to empty our pockets and our wallets. Now we clearly see the idols of today we worship: smartphones linked to social media platforms designed to reinforce only what we already believe and denigrate all other perspectives; political language from both sides that treats contrary news as fake news; lifestyle enclaves in which we isolate ourselves from others; not to mention the prisons we fill, the schools we under-fund, the social services we scale back, and the long-term goals we ignore in our “Get It Now” culture of today.

I read about a sociology experiment done about 20 years ago by a Harvard professor named Robert Sampson. It was a simple measure of the health of our neighborhoods.¹ He stamped and addressed thousands of letters and then scattered them on the sidewalks of various streets in a major U.S. city. He took notes on the neighborhoods in which he scattered the envelopes—whether businesses were active or boarded up, whether there was litter and broken windows or clean curbs. His research documented in which locations people were willing to pick up a lost letter and put it in a mailbox, and which ones were okay trampling on the envelopes and abandoning them on the sidewalk. Sampson's study went on to measure levels of “moral cynicism” that are active in our cities—the idea that government should be distrusted, that laws and common courtesies are not binding, that small acts of kindness aren't worth the effort. What sort of God are people following when simple courtesies no longer matter and when they cynically believe a sense of connection with our neighbors should no longer guide our behavior?

Joshua shouted at the crowd, “If you are unwilling to serve God, choose this day whom you will serve...but for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” The people in Shechem quickly replied “Yes, of course, we too will serve the Lord.” But Joshua shot back at them stern words of warning. He said “No, you cannot serve the Lord. God is a jealous God—(or perhaps a better translation)—God is a zealous God, who has done good things for you and asks of you a deep commitment to God’s law, justice and righteousness. This was a pivotal moment and a turning point in their lives. And it had to start with them emptying their baggage of idols both old and new, putting away false gods and moral cynicism. Only then could the people answer “Yes, it is God alone whom we will serve and obey.”

What does this Joshua Moment mean for us today—both as a nation and as individuals? The more I pondered that, the more I realized that now is not the time for Baptist fire, for Pentecostal fervor or rabble-rousing rhetoric. (Which is fortunate, because my Kansas upbringing left me woefully short of those resources.) As I said earlier, nothing has fundamentally changed in America. The biologist Hope Jahren has written, “Ultimately we are only endowed with four resources: earth, ocean, sky and each other.”² There are blue skies above us, trees with autumn leaves around us, lawns needing to be raked below us. There is also racism and poverty, a dangerous pandemic, economic uncertainty, personal fears and anxieties that need our sustained attention. Joshua asks us whom we will serve and perhaps a bit too quickly we say “We will serve the Lord.” Joshua argues with us, warns us to mean what we say and say what we mean. Chastened we reply again, “We will serve the Lord.” And to emphasize our words we go further and say, “We are witnesses.” Hold us to our words. Hold us to this commitment. Tell it to our children. We will serve God alone.

At that point Joshua ends the conversation with one simple admonition: “*Friends, put away the foreign gods that are among you and incline your hearts to the Lord your God.*” In effect Joshua tells it to us straight. “No, you have not been served well by the false gods of your past, by your prejudices, your pocket-sized idols and easy, self-serving answers. Step away from them. Look at the sky, the ocean, the earth and at one another. Look at the horizon before you. Then breathe and take in the zeal of the Lord who loves you unconditionally. How do you do this? It’s simple: Incline your hearts to God. In this 2020 Joshua moment, consciously, humbly open yourself to a grace that defeats all moral cynicism and a compassion that seeks every lost lamb of every nation. Incline yourself; trust yourself to the One whose love will never let you go. Ever.

At the end of John 6, Jesus’ teaching had managed to offend lots of people and caused some followers to abandon him. Seeing this, he turned to the twelve disciples and said “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter said, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” In this American Joshua moment, in this personal Joshua moment, look around. There’s work to be done; wrongs to be righted; wounds to be dressed; hands to be extended across divides; and damage to be repaired for the sake of our children and children’s children. All other pathways are dead ends; all other priorities are little more than cheap idols. Choose this day the One whose words lead to

life and life eternal. Incline your hearts to God. Let us walk forward by faith together.
May God's people say, Amen.

¹ Cf. New York Times, November 1, 2020

² Hope Jahren, The Story of More, p. 14.