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Osler Mennonite Church

Equipped in Faithfulness:

Joshua 24:14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20; Psalm 84

Good Morning Everyone,

We began this morning's service by joining together in a beautiful call to worship that George selected for us. The words expressed echo the lines of praise and adoration found in Psalm 84, raising up our voices with awe and wonder at the welcoming love that God gives to us. It's a perfect piece of scripture for a call to worship because it is thought that its original use was as a pilgrimage song for God's people as they made their way toward a significant worship destination. Both of our scripture texts today call us to contextualize our lives within a journey of discipleship, so this pilgrimage psalm is the wonderful way to frame our hearts and minds as we engage with this message.

Theologian James Mays declares that "every visit to a temple or church or meeting place of believers is in a profound sense, a pilgrimage... Christians have read and sung Psalm 84 and through it praise God to whom we all 'go' in different ways." The pilgrimage is a journey that we embark upon together to seek an encounter with the living God. It is our visible actions that transform into revelations about who God is and where we may find rest along our journey. The journey we are called into in today's scriptures is a difficult one, which makes preparing our hearts all the more important, so I invite you again to join your voices in lifting up today's call to worship:

How wonderful it is to be in a dwelling place for God.

The refreshing springs of God's love cleanse and restore us.

There is a place here for everyone. No one is turned away.

The least & the lost, the helpless & the hopeless – All are welcome with God.

Praise to God who invites and shelters us all.

Praise to God who heals us and sends us forth to serve.

In a setting where Joshua has been given a role of high power, he stands in front of the Israelites to challenge their prevailing notion of faithfulness, not to himself but to God. Joshua reflects on their roots as a nation. Prior to our selected verses he goes over the history of the Israelites that continues to influence their daily lives and traditions.

Then he shifts the tone of the address, and names a more difficult conversation, pointing out their ancestors' disloyalty, their failings, and idolatry. To use this victory speech to bring up the ways their ancestors have served other gods would be shocking, and if the crowd is anything like crowds today, likely got peoples' defenses up immediately. Even more offensive than Joshua tainting the memory of their ancestors is his insinuation that their practices are still influencing the actions of the crowd today.

Elaine Enns and Ched Myers published a book this summer titled *Healing Haunted Histories*. It is a book that calls the reader in, to reflect on our own histories and teachings, to reflect on the gaps within them, the harms that have been endured, and the harms that have been inflicted. They pronounce that Joshua's critical and compassionate reflection is important because **"who our people were is who we are, as products of the stories we carry."** Just like Joshua's crowd, our discipleship work begins with looking at what we are bringing with us, and then to dutifully engage in the work of unpacking the idols that have crept into our ancestral teachings, that become their own idols and barriers to God's love. The journey of the Israelites throughout the Old Testament continues to be the slow work of relearning what it means to cultivate a life around faithfulness to YHWH. It is an undoing of the deeply ingrained patterns of life that were passed down from generation to generation.

This scripture passage brings with it a strong challenge of self-reflection. I think that there have always been idols that creep into our daily lives, and this experience would be true for the Israelites, and for my ancestors. So, what does it mean for me to throw away the gods of my ancestors, in order that I can more fully serve my God? My ancestors were settlers, that participated in the colonization of North America. They inherited and perpetuated a culture of separation from those who were different and grossly mistreated people who were social 'others.' What I've inherited is a life of privilege that is filled with benefits from the oppression of other people and now, in this verse, I believe that I'm challenged to make a choice, to give up these ways.

The English translation calls us to “serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness.” but the Hebrew phrase actually contains the meaning “Serve God with *integrity* and in faithfulness.” The call to integrity reminds me that it is my responsibility to do the work required to undo the patterns in my life that do not reflect the heart of God. It is my job to look at my roots, and to be honest about what I need to let go of and adjust in order to live out my faith with integrity.

This work is hard, and it takes up time and energy, and can lead us down endless rabbit trails of questions without answers. It is much easier to cut off from this work of historical reflection and its present-day impacts. Joshua understands this, and so he presents a choice **“If you do not want to worship YHWH, then make the decision today whom you will worship, even if it is the gods of your ancestors.”** If I refuse to actively throw off the other gods or idols in my life then the least that I can do is face the decision I’ve made honestly. Who or what is it that I’m going to serve? There is no such thing as neutral in the act of faithfulness. Whether it’s the idols of the past or the present, they are actively a part of this world, creeping into the values that I inherit and the choices that I make, and having tangible impacts on the world around me. (*pause*)

This is too bleak a call on its own, an exhausting and unrelenting pilgrimage of self-reflection and denouncing idols feels quite distant from the peaceful dwelling place we claimed in our mornings psalm. For a link between the two we turn to our Ephesians text, which gives us direction in how to equip ourselves for this task. While Joshua speaks out to a crowd as a commander, the Ephesians’ letter is written by a prisoner, clearly illustrating the point that our own vulnerabilities do not disqualify us from stepping into the armour of God, and the tasks it enables us to do.

Paul looks for a symbol of discipleship that makes clear that discipleship is to impact every part of our being, and he weaves in values of truth, justice, peace, and liberation into mechanisms previously used for domination and control.

Paul uses a military metaphor because he would have been sitting in a cell and looking at the armour worn by the people guarding him, and decided to transform it into an image for good, the way Jesus transforms the image of the cross from death to life. This subversive metaphor carries one meaning from a chained person writing to a small persecuted community, but the same words sound quite different when wielded by a church wedded to institutions and systems of power and control. Since I speak from a position of power and not chains, a new metaphor is needed. Lucky for me, the Christian imagination is capable of new visions of alertness, resilience, confidence, and identification with Christ.

Elaine Enns and Ched Myers encourage us to embrace our own transformation symbols and tools that speak into our current context. When reflecting on where we come from, they urge readers to identify ‘song-lines’ which they define as **“the things that sustain and empower us... traditions of faith and Spirit that animated resilience and redemptive practices in our ancestry and that help us work for justice and healing today.”** So instead of metaphors of armour to strengthen us on our pilgrimage, we have other tools that are imbedded in our histories that sustain us in the values of Christ.

When looking for the song-lines in our community, I think of the music carried in our hymnals that strengthen our hearts in times of joy and hardship. I picture the quilts that have been created out of scraps to make sure nothing is wasted in times of scarcity, and the quilts that have been produced in mass and sent around the world by those same hands. I think of the traditions of hospitality and welcome; maybe for this there is a specific meal or casserole dish that serves as a symbol for you. I think of the shoes that have allowed me to journey to places that fill me with peace, perhaps a pair of hikers for exploring Shekinah. And how these places of peace remind me of my duty to tend the world of God’s creation.

If you have time today or this week to sit a little longer with this scripture, I'm sure you will find your own song-lines to pull into these verses. The artists among us can redraw images of ourselves cloaked in the song-lines that sustain us, the poets giving us renewed language for equipping ourselves in a journey of faithfulness.

In our commitment to serve God, we are not only entering into the work of throwing off our personal idols, but wading into the work of overthrowing the very existence of these evil forces. This struggle is real, and dangerous, and there is a clear urgency in our mornings text. Its author is writing this message from an imprisonment that they are facing because of this very fight.

Our Joshua text is a call of covenant renewal, asking God's followers to choose to commit again to following God. This isn't a reaction to their failing as a people; it's an acknowledgement that this journey is dynamic and shifting, and we will need to adapt and transform as we continue along the path. That we will need to undo harmful patterns, and release methods that no longer serve us in discipleship, *and* we need to uncover and hold strong to the song-lines that continue to shape us into people of hope and love.

There is no illusion that this will be an easy, simple, quick transformation. In committing to a life of integrity and faithfulness we can expect to enter the arena against all the personal and social forces that resist God's transformation. But we are not alone. The call made in Ephesians isn't written to an individual, but to a community of believers. In Joshua, the crowd commits as a collective. We have one another to lean on and encourage us as we commit to this pilgrimage. We have a rich history of those who came before us to guide us in how to live our values as disciples. And we have a God whose faithful presence restores us along the way. Amen.

Benediction:

We are sent from worship to live as faithful disciples of Jesus
through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are sent from worship with God's blessing,
encircled by God's shalom.

Sources: NIB Commentary, Believers Bible Commentary, Healing Haunted Histories by Ched Meyer & Elaine Enns