

“Inheritances”

Joshua 1:1-9

Joshua 24, selected verses

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Moses had led the Israelites across the Red Sea, out of slavery in Egypt. He received the 10 Commandments from the Lord to guide them, and led the people for 40 years in the wilderness. But Moses died before the Israelites crossed over to the Promised Land. Listen to the Word of God from the book of Joshua, chapter 1, as the people come to the banks of the River Jordan and God prepares them to cross over.

### **First Scripture Lesson** Joshua 1:1-9

After the death of Moses, the Lord spoke to Joshua, Moses' assistant, saying:

“My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving them. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness as far as the great river Euphrates, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

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Crossing over the Jordan into the Promised Land – it became a powerful image for generations of slaves in America; it's still a powerful image for any

of us who *know* that our struggles are not the last word; who *trust* that God’s promise is sure, and there is a better future in store for us still.

Crossing the Jordan: for the Israelites it meant finally reaching the Promised Land after generations of slavery in Egypt, and 40 years of struggle in the wilderness. Yet crossing over the Jordan River is just the start of their new life. The book of Joshua chronicles what happens next, as bit by bit, they settle into the land of Canaan. It is not easy. Occasionally they’re welcomed by some who already lives there; far more often they battle those who inhabit the land. By the end of the book, they have settled into the land. Then each of the 12 Tribes of Israel – that is, the descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob – is given a particular territory as their own.

Our second lesson comes at the end of the book, with Joshua’s last instructions at the close of his life. Joshua has led his people faithfully through their struggles. Now, he gives his last will and testament to the people he has led. Listen as Joshua invites them to look backwards to God’s faithfulness to their ancestors, and then invites them to look forward to commit themselves to the Lord:

### **Second Scripture Lesson** Joshua 24, selected verses

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel. And Joshua said, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates River and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt; and afterwards I brought your ancestors out. You came to the Red Sea; and the Egyptians pursued with chariots and horsemen. I put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come up and cover them. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the Jordan; and I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns

that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant.’

Then Joshua said, “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the peoples in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses to yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

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Choices. We make a thousand choices every day, from the moment we get out of bed till our head hits the pillow at night. Pedestrian choices, like what to eat for breakfast; annoying choices, like how to get around the traffic jam; happy choices, like what to get your best friend for their birthday. Choices. Every day we make a thousand of them. But now and then ... now and then we find ourselves drowning in choices that feel both urgent and arbitrary.

I felt that way as we cleaned out my Dad’s apartment this month. We’re blessed for the reason: he’s moved into Assisted Living, where he is adjusting very well. He enjoys playing duplicate bridge with old friends, he lives near

my brother, his favorite bridge partner, and he's receiving the help he needs day and night to function at his very best.

But once we got him settled in his new place, it was time to clean out his old place – and boy, did we have a lot of urgent and arbitrary choices to make. This week, before his lease expired, we finished moving out everything he didn't take with him, which was A LOT. Some of it went to the dumpster; some of it went to Rummage; most of it came to our house, until my siblings and their families come at Thanksgiving, and everybody chooses what they want for themselves.

Many of you have faced similar choices – sadly, most often when a loved one dies. I've been through that too, when our Mom passed away, and we needed to figure out which of her jewelry to keep in the family and what to give away; what clothing, if any, to keep for posterity and what should just be tossed. I went through it again when my friend Denise died, and I helped her daughters sort through her possessions; and I experienced again when I helped my sister clean out her ex-husband's apartment when he died suddenly last year. It is so hard to decide what to keep and what to pass along.

Maybe you've been there too. When someone dies, it feels like it is their whole life, their whole memory we are dispensing with. The most ordinary things, like shoes and papers and toothbrushes, take on a peculiarly sacred feeling when someone we love dies. We know they'll never use them again, but dispensing with them still feels so final, as if we're dispensing not only with their things but with their very lives. The choices we make ... they are poignant and painful and packed with meaning.

When someone dies, we are required to spend an immense amount of energy on the *things* we inherit from them. But it's made me wonder: what if ... what if we spent as much energy on the *invisible gifts* we inherit too? What if we spent time pondering the *wisdom* they've left us, born of their struggles and victories and failures and hopes?

That is just the question that faces us today on All Saints Day, as we remember those who have gone before. Because our inheritance is so much more than their *things* we have been left. All Saints Day invites us to sort through the wisdom they have left us. How do we do that sorting? Today's second lesson gives us a wonderful template.

The lesson opens with an invitation to look backward, to remember the challenges our loved ones faced, and how God remained faithful to them. "Long ago," says the Lord, "Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons—lived beyond the Euphrates River and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through the land of Canaan and made his offspring many." The blessing of God's presence, from generation to generation is recounted: through Isaac, and Jacob, and Jacob's offspring who went to Egypt, and Moses who led them across the Red Sea – God was with their ancestors all along.

Looking backwards and remembering where we come from: that is the place we're invited to start too. I loved an exercise we did at our Women's Retreat last weekend. When we were asked to talk about the meaning of our names, many of us talked about not only the national origins of our family names – we also talked about stories associated with them. At least three of the women gathered there noted that their ancestors were horse thieves in Britain! Who would have thought? Many also told of hardships that propelled their families to the New World, of challenges and opportunities, of fear and faithfulness. We all come from somewhere – and the stories we tell of resilience and courage help to shape us still today.

And our recent history matters too. I can't tell you how moving it is to preside at funerals and memorial services and hear the testimonies. And there's always a common thread. There are never stories of *things* that are left behind; but there are always stories about the *experiences, values and memories* our loved ones leave us. At my aunt's funeral two weekends ago, we were reminded that her marriage to my uncle was, well, hurried. They fell in love at a USO dance and nine months later, my cousin came along. Their

life wasn't always easy – whose is? But they made the most of their marriage, with humor and grace, perseverance and humility – which their children and grandchildren observed and took in. And I wonder: as you consider those whom you have loved and lost, what would you most treasure of their lives? What do you want to keep? What do you hope to pass along to those you love, so at the end of your life, others might treasure those things in you?

That's the first invitation the Scripture gives us in our sorting of the treasures we received: look backwards, take time to sort through the values, experiences, and faithfulness of those who came before. Remember what they've been through: because remembering helps those seeds take root and grow and bear fruit in our lives. Remembering, intentionally, long after the funeral service is over, will keep those treasures alive in us.

And the second invitation the Scripture gives us? It's to look forward, to be intentional about our *choice* of whom – or what – we will serve throughout our very lives. Joshua reminds the Israelites that their ancestors had to choose which god they would serve: Abraham had to choose between the gods of the place he was born, and the Lord God who called him into covenant. Jacob's sons had to choose between the gods of Egypt where they settled, or the Lord God who had provided for them in a famine. Now it was time for this generation to choose: would they choose the gods of the land of Canaan where they were settling down, or would they choose the Lord God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt?

And if we think our closer ancestors didn't have to make hard choices like that, we are sadly mistaken. My great-grandparents who left Turkey had to decide whether they would convert to Islam to save their skin, or cling to their Christian faith and flee to safety. I thank God they chose to keep the faith instead of bowing to fear. A man who was like a mentor to me was given an amazing opportunity in civic leadership. He took the position – only to find out that one major donor held the purse-strings, and placed demands on him that were close to unethical, and certainly counter to the calling of his institution. I thank God my mentor chose to lead with integrity, instead of

bowing to expediency. My guess is that you have people in your life who also set that firm example for you: who kept the faith, and refused to bow to the “gods” of popularity, refused to bow to the “gods” of money, refused to bow to the “gods” of fame, refused to bow to the “gods” of fitting in. Remembering their integrity? It does more than make us proud of them. It gives us courage ... courage to choose the Lord our God when we face the panoply of seductive options before us.

Our ancestors long ago ... our loved ones newly gone ... they left so much to us. So many things, yes – the jewelry and the clothing and whatever else they left. We have so many choices to make, about what to keep, and what to let go of. But they left so much more than things. Today, let’s take the time to remember their past. Let’s take time to choose from our inheritance from them: to cherish the values they left us; the example they gave us; the courage they modeled for us. Then let’s look to our own future – and choose to serve the Lord our God ... the Lord who has walked with each generation in the past ... the Lord who will be faithful to us still. Amen.