

The Freedom to Turn Back  
Joshua 24, selected verses  
John 6:56-69

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’”

If faith is a gift from God, clearly it is gift we are free to refuse. The sixth chapter of John’s Gospel begins with 5000 men plus women and children feasting on Jesus’ every word. The sixth chapter ends with only the twelve and Jesus, who is asking them whether they wish to go away too. His question is heartbreaking. As in ancient Israel and early Christianity, so also today, though perhaps for different reasons, believing in the God who led the Israelites out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead is hard. In fact, you could conclude from the two stories before us this morning that this God literally double dares God’s people to live in relationship to him.

In the first story, Joshua challenges the people to put away all other gods in order to serve the Lord alone. In response, the people rehearse the story of their relationship with this God thus far and agree to serve God alone. Doubting their resolve as they enter a land that is awash with other gods, Joshua presses them again, warning them that the God they have chosen to serve is a jealous God. “No,” they protest, “we will serve the Lord!”

In the second story, Jesus’ words about coming down from heaven, his command to crunch his flesh and drink his blood, were blasphemous and abhorrent words to his followers. “This teaching is difficult,” they said. “Who can accept it?” But instead of explaining or backtracking in order to keep the congregation with him, Jesus doubles down. “Does this offend you?” Then how about this, Jesus says: “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” In other words, you have a problem with my claim to have come from God? Well wait until you see me returning to God. Hearing these words, many of Jesus’ disciples “turned back and no longer went about with him.”

I found myself wondering how the exchange between Joshua and the people or between Jesus and the congregation in Capernaum would play out today. How can we hear the present edge in Joshua's insistence that all other gods be forsaken and the ongoing offense in Jesus' claim to be from God? Both stories partake of what theologians have called "the scandal of particularity," the inconvenience of having a God who chose one people to bear God's promise and who chose, through the life, death and resurrection of one man, to be known by us. Much as I would prefer to minimize the scandal so as to make us all feel open-minded in a 21<sup>st</sup> century sort of way, this is a Sunday when eating God's words may lead us to choke on God's word.

Take, in the first place, Joshua's insistence that God's people put away all other gods to serve the Lord alone. What gods must we put away? There are the obvious gods of money and success, family and nation. But the wilier god of today is the god whose name is spirituality. "It's a great and self-serving mess," writes religion commentator David Mills, "this claim to be 'spiritual but not religious,' which we hear from almost anyone who talks about religion in public....It's one of those easily remembered phrases that works like a 'get out of jail free' card for anyone who feels [the need] to explain [a] lack of religious practice."

But if you press the believer to speak about the substance of "spirituality," things get even messier. Mills cites "a much reported study of college students' religious practices [which] found that they became much more "spiritual" as their observance of their childhood faith declined. The researchers defined "spiritual" as 'growth in self-understanding, caring about others, becoming more of a global citizen and accepting others of different faiths.'" In other words, take the basic values you received as a part of a religious community, remove both the community and God, and voila! You are spiritual but not religious.

Yet with no relationship to an actual spirit, without “something that or someone who tells us things we do not know, judges us for our failures, and gives us ideals to strive for and maybe help in reaching them,” Mills writes, “there is no reason to call [a general inclination or shape of mind or emotional pattern or set of attitudes or collection of values] *spiritual*.” Except that this is *precisely the reason to be* “spiritual but not religious.” Without referent, without accountability to something or someone outside the self, with only a vague notion of an immense “otherness” out there in space or an intimate ineffability deep inside of you, “spiritual but not religious” has become the iconoclastic mantra of individualism. “It is a way of feeling better about being alone in the universe,” Mills says. It is “a comfortable compromise between...our desire for God and our desire to be God ourselves.”

Ours seems to be a very different choice from the choice that the Israelites faced at the border between the wilderness and the promised land. Theirs was a choice to serve the many gods of their ancestors, gods whose power over rain and drought, over victory and defeat, over fertility and barrenness, over life and death, was mercurial and indifferent to human suffering. They devised rituals and sacrifices in order to please these gods, rituals and sacrifices that ultimately would not avail with the God who jealously desired a people that would serve the one God alone in sincerity and faithfulness. Theirs was a choice between many gods and this particular God.

The choice between “spirituality” and religion seems more like a choice between going it alone when it comes to the meaning and purpose of our lives and the gift of a meeting, a relationship with God, given us in the company of flawed and forgiven others. “The moment you acknowledge a real spirit to whom your spirituality is oriented and by whom it is guided,” Mills says, “you are bound by something.” As regards Christianity, you are bound by a community, a text, a story, a history, a promise, a word not your own; ultimately and together you are bound by

a relationship to Someone outside of yourself with whom you must wrestle, against whom you may push and question and argue, but with whom you daily have to do, in this life and the life to come. Choose this day whom you will serve.

In the second story, set in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus double dares the congregation to play not so much the “get out of religion jail card” as the “get out of following him to the cross card.” Notice in both stories, the people in question are already God’s people, already part of the worshipping congregation. This is not a matter of secular versus sacred. These are all folks who once said, at the very least, “No, we will serve or follow this God and see where it takes us.” The substance of Jesus’ double dare has first to do with John’s scandalous claim that *God* was in Christ; that in Jesus we are having to do with God, with the relationship that faith is. When people say, as we say, “This teaching is very difficult; who can accept it?” Jesus asks, “Does this scandalize you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” Rather than accommodating God’s revelation to human reason, he repeats the claim that God has come to them in him. Not in *other* words but in this *particular* word made flesh, we may know who God is toward us.

The double dare is the scandalous claim that God was in *Christ*, in this particular man. Where was God’s presence to be found after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.? I remind you that two communities had their beginnings in response to that question. For rabbinic Judaism, God was to be encountered in the words of the law and the prophets; for Christianity, God was to be encountered in Jesus Christ, a scandal that rose to the level of idolatry. It is this second claim that has become equally hard for us, causing many a liberal spirit to turn away. To say that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in *Christ*, in this particular man, is to say that God was revealed in this way and not another. The whole problem would be alleviated if we would simply

say, instead, he is “one light of life, one word of God: the clearest, perhaps; a particularly important one, and of great urgency for us; but only one of the many testimonies to the truth which have been given by others and which have also to be studied and assessed together with His” [Barth]. The scandal is that this one Word of God is spoken to and finally against the very community gathered by him. The people who turned back were the people in the congregation that day. This is the word of God on which we choke.

Without removing the scandal of the claim, John Baillie, the Scottish preacher and theologian, addresses not only our difficulty with what seems to be the exclusive claim that God was in *Christ*, but also the individualism of our preference for spirituality over religion. He hears John’s claim through Jesus’ thrice repeated prayer in John’s Gospel “that they all may be one....” “[I]f it had been so,” he writes, “that each could find God in his own way, each would be finding [God] without at the same time finding [one another].”

This past Wednesday, I was invited as a member of the Interfaith Board of Greater Philadelphia (a board that includes Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Baha’is, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons and more), to meet with six scholars from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Saudi Arabia. To a person, each told us of their focus on routing out the radicalism and countering the fundamentalist extremes that are capturing the minds of their own young people. A very different picture than the media paints. At the end of the conversation, we were asked to offer blessings to one another. One member of our board offered the image of a mountain on which all different religions were headed toward the top, where God dwells. At the bottom, he said, all were far apart from one another, but as each came closer to the one God, all came closer to one another.

The issue is what we claim for the path we are walking. Christianity as a religion is no less judged by revelation than the next religion. That is the critical self-understanding that we miss!!

Ultimately, when we are all included in the love and eternity that God is, I have no doubt that we will be one. In the meantime, we likely will follow the devices and desires of our own hearts, to borrow the words of the old general confession, and so will continue to kill one another in the name of the God who belongs to us exclusively, because the love that God is, is the love that leaves even Christ's church free to turn back from the God who alone is God.

This is why the chapter that began with five thousand following him ends with the twelve. It is sort of like the congregation at the end of August in this sanctuary; sort of like the Protestant church at the end of the last millennium. As Jesus asked the twelve, so he asks you and me on the boundary between the wilderness and the promised land of our lives, asks us at the crossroads where we find his teaching difficult, his claims unacceptable: "Do you also wish to turn back?" True freedom, of course, awaits those who do not turn back. For only in his company will we live and die in relation to the one who alone has the words of eternal life. Thanks be to God.