

A Summons to Covenant Renewal  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
November 9, 2008  
Scripture: Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 22:34-40

It was, to say the very least, a moment history would never forget.

It was the culmination of a long and trying journey by generations of a people who had held on to see a promise fulfilled. It was the victorious result of many so battles fought and, at that moment, ultimately, won.

It was also a gathering of peoples and a summons to them to live differently thereafter.

It was the passing of the torch, a transition in leadership to a new generation and a time to remember another leader who had predicted this day would come but foretold that he would not get there with his people.

It was a new day for a nation of such potential, and all who witnessed it and participated in it were changed.

That was the scene ... about 3,000 years ago, at Shechem, a trading crossroads and religious center located forty miles north of Jerusalem.

There, Joshua had called for a gathering of the tribes of Israel. As the successor to Moses, Joshua had led Israel across the Jordan River into Canaan, the land of milk and honey that God had pledged.

Now, in his last days, Joshua had summoned the tribes to renew their pledge of allegiance to Yahweh, who had brought their nation out of slavery and into the promised land.

As I have explained before, I generally follow the suggested Biblical texts for preaching from what we call the Common Lectionary. The book of Joshua appears rarely in the lectionary; only three times out of hundreds of passages of scripture selected for use over a three-year cycle.

This story of how Joshua summoned the tribes of Israel in a call for unity is the suggested Old Testament text for this Sunday. It is a story worth exploring on any Sunday. But, this Sunday, the parallels to what we have witnessed in our own nation this past week are rich and unmistakable.

Like the Israelites 3,000 years ago, we are witnessing our own historic transition as a result of Tuesday's elections.

I've heard so many reactions from so many of you. In one email, someone said it felt like America was "smiling from the inside out." Another one of you said that you had to keep moving to stay busy on Wednesday, lest you would melt down in tears of joy.

But I liked the simple, one word reaction I heard from another one of you.

That word was ... "Amen."

As with the Israelites who gathered to hear Joshua speak at Shechem, millions of Americans feel as if we are a nation born anew.

As with the Israelites at Shechem, a generation of a people has seen a promise fulfilled in a way their ancestors might never have imagined.

As with the Israelites at Shechem, we are a nation that has been summoned by the week's events and called to live differently.

There are so many images and words from this past week that are running through my mind today, and I am sure the same must be true for you.

For African-Americans, the election of Barak Obama in many ways lifts the veil that has shrouded our nation's promise that anyone can grow up to achieve anything in this country.

Our work as a nation is not over. Much remains to be done, of course, to deliver equality and opportunity to all. But our choice on Tuesday says that there are no limitations that cannot be removed, no barriers that cannot be broken.

Tuesday's outcome has renewed the hope not just of African-Americans or other racial or ethnic minorities in America. It has renewed the hope of a country. It's a victory that is about race in America yet it transcends race, because of who Obama is. And in that way, Barak Obama's victory is our victory.

America has chosen a leader who promises to help us all conduct a long-overdue conversation about identity, not just racial identity, mind you, but national identity, because the blood running through our new leader's veins is not of any one race. As he

said of himself in a press conference Friday, he is a “mutt.” In that way, he represents not any one of us ... or any group of us ... but all of us.

Now, I want to be clear about one thing ... and I can speak with some authority about this.

Barack Obama is NOT the messiah. He is not perfect. He will make his mistakes and we will have our days of disappointment. Such is the nature of leadership.

But, for us as a nation, it has been a week of choices and decisions and beginning, just beginning, to think and hope and, yes, perhaps dream about what good things may come of the choices we have made.

And ... if you find yourself thinking and hoping and even dreaming anew about our national future ... it's also a good time ... indeed, there is no better time ... to renew our pledge of allegiance to our God.

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That was why Joshua had summoned the tribes of Israel in Shechem more than 3,000 years ago.

Joshua had led Israel across the Jordan River into the promised land, where Israel had conquered the native peoples and settled and divided the land for themselves according to God's promise. Now, aware that he is in his final days, Joshua has gathered the leaders of all the tribes and he has chosen a place of historical importance.

It was at Shechem that God first addressed Abraham.

“To your offspring I will give this land,” God said to Abram.

Two generations later, Abraham's grandson Jacob would lead his household in a ceremony of burying idols at Shechem.

So it was altogether appropriate that Joshua would pick this place to call Israel, one more time, to pledge loyalty to God. Joshua knew, you see, that Israel had a history of backsliding. Indeed, that is the story that echoes through the entire Old Testament, Israel's forgetting who they were, whose they were and to whom they owed the credit for their blessings.

In his final speech, serving as God's spokesman and mediator, Joshua recounts God's acts of deliverance. Joshua makes it clear that God acted first and that Israel is called to respond with loyalty and commitment. Now, he says, it is the hour of Israel's decision, the time when Israel must choose once and for all.

"Now," says Joshua, "therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord."

We should take note that Joshua does not go for the easy sell. He does not set the bar low, quite the contrary.

Joshua knows that as Israel dwells in the Promised land it will encounter cultures that worship other gods and pagan idols that would compete for Israel's faith. So Joshua emphasizes the "jealousness" of God, but that word "jealousness" is better understood as zealousness.

God is a demanding God, who requires not our partial commitment but our full obedience.

God didn't go half-way, Joshua is saying. In God's zeal, God went all the way in selecting Israel to be God's chosen and liberated people ... and, later, in liberating the world from sin in and through Jesus Christ. Joshua's message for Israel then – and for us today - is that God requires faith of the same un-limited, un-mitigated quality.

That is an important distinction. Thinking about God as having the human emotion of jealousy risks reducing our understanding of God. But it is entirely different to know that God's pure zealousness defines God's faithfulness to us. I don't know about you, but I prefer a God who is fully committed – and demands the same from us – rather than a wishy-washy God who is willing to settle for wishy-washy faith.

Joshua's speech, as recorded in scripture, makes particular use of a series of active verbs: Joshua says God gave, God spent, God brought out, God handed over, God rescued.

Centuries later, the authors of what we call the Larger Catechism, one of our denomination's historical creeds, made similar use of a series of verbs in listing a believer's duties according to the First Commandment. We will use a section of that confession as our Affirmation of Faith in a few moments. In it, we will say that we worship and glorify God by: thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming,

honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing, believing, trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in and being zealous for God.

That is the kind of complete faith that God called Israel to practice then ... and us today.

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To return, then, to the events of the past week, what if any parallels might we take away from this from story of a nation more than 3,000 years ago and the story of our nation today?

To be sure, there are major differences. Israel at the time of the gathering at Shechem was a theocracy, a nation governed by God and God alone, speaking through God's chosen mediators, such as Moses and Joshua. America is, of course, a democracy, a government by, for and of the people.

Still, I would offer three quick points, three ways we can make a covenant renewal of our own.

First: One of Joshua's reasons for gathering the different tribes of Israel at Shechem was to put out a call for unity amid diversity. Even though they would live separately in scattered cities and settlements, Joshua called the tribes to find common ground in faith in God.

That remains our call today. And I believe, as I have said to you before, that that is our particular call here at Caldwell church. God is building a congregation here that reflects diversity not just in race but in all walks of life. It is a rare gift we have all been given, one that we must cherish and intentionally sustain as we listen for how God would use this part of the Body of Christ.

We must navigate the diversity of our day and the multi-faith world of our century, holding true to our belief in God in Jesus Christ while also seeking to understand what we can claim as good and true in other faiths. Doing that is not easy. If we think it is, we're really not practicing faith with integrity.

But this is where we might take a tip from our President-elect. Putting aside his politics and policies, our new national leader has set a new tone in America, largely in how he handles himself. He has invited America into a different kind of conversation defined by a sincere belief in the greater good.

Let us pray that, as a nation that faces serious economic, military and social crises, we do not lose sight of that aspiration. And, here at Caldwell church, let us show that we love each other and our neighbors according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, not just in spite of our differences, but even more richly because of them.

Second, just as the tribes of Israel looked out on their promised land at Shechem, we have been reminded that America must redouble its commitment to being a land of promise for all its inhabitants. I like what Charlotte Observer columnist Tommy Tomlinson wrote yesterday: "Obama means a dream deferred is not always a dream denied. Obama means the road to the promised land is a public highway."

Let us pray that we can retain the spirit and deliver on the letter of equality and opportunity and justice for all that we feel in these first days when a self-described "mutt" prepares to occupy our highest elected office.

Third and finally and, by far most important, as with the tribes of Israel gathered at Shechem, let us pledge our allegiance once and for all to our God, a God who has delivered us thus far and who has promised always to be our deliverer, whatever awaits us.

Joshua knew that complete devotion to God can be harder in times of freedom than in slavery.

As we renew our covenant relationship with God this day and every day we gather for worship, let us pray that we "revere" and "serve the Lord with sincerity in faithfulness."

Let us put away any other gods, whether they are gods of political ideology, personal agenda or our own prejudices, that would distract us from what Jesus Christ gave us as the greatest commandment: that we should love the Lord with all our hearts and souls and minds and we shall love our neighbor as ourselves.

That alone will keep us as challenged and as busy and as joyful as we could ever ask.

Amen.