

Generation We

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

The story that the Bible tells often reads like a family tree of faith. Scattered throughout the Old Testament and the gospels are genealogies, like mile markers along a road. Those are the passages that never get read in worship, and the ones that we most likely skip over when we read the Bible ourselves. Why take the time to wade through lists of people who most have never heard of, with names that few can pronounce? What purpose does it serve?

Well, it served an important purpose for the Israelites. For one thing, it reminded them that they were all part of one great household of people who were defined not by ancestry alone, but by their association with a God who was ever active in their history. God was known, not in mythological tales and dramas, but in the stories of real people and real historical events. God even referred to Himself in terms of His relationship to bygone generations; often introducing Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God who led them up from slavery in Egypt, or the God who gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. And, they divided their history according to the generations of those who had preceded them.

Our Old Testament reading this morning falls in the Joshua Generation. The Moses Generation before them had been slaves in Egypt. God had sent Moses to lead them to freedom. After that, they had wandered in the desert for forty years, searching and waiting for a land of their own. Moses had climbed a mountain and glimpsed the Promised Land, but he died before he could ever set foot on its soil. The mantle of leadership passed from Moses to Joshua. Joshua led the people across the Jordan River into Canaan, where they claimed a homeland for themselves. Now it was Joshua whose time was running out. So, he assembled the people of Israel, they of the "Joshua Generation," and reminded them of their ancestors who had served God and how God had delivered them and protected them.

Joshua gathered them at a place named Shechem, which was very symbolic because Shechem was literally a great crossroads. Which is where they all were. At a great crossroads in their destiny as a people. Shechem was also a place rich with history. It was the first place that their ancestor Abraham came to when he entered Canaan at God's beckoning. It was the spot where another ancestor—Jacob—buried the family idols and built an altar to God.

Now, Joshua challenged the Hebrews to recommit themselves to serving the God who had brought them this far, and to shun the worship of all other gods. He recounted all the generations that had preceded them up to this point to help them recall God's steadfast faithfulness to them. He challenged them to pledge themselves, household by household to serve the Lord. Their own words would stand as witness against them should they abandon the way that God set before them. He said, "Now if you are willing 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 Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua sealed the deal with a covenant; an agreement with guidelines by which faithfulness would be measured by future generations.

Our nation's history can also be measured by generations; some of which mirror the generations of the Israelites. The first Pilgrims who felt led by God 400 years ago to sail across the Atlantic to a New World could be our Abraham Generation, because Abraham was called by God to leave his home beyond the

Euphrates in order to start a new nation. Our ancestors who fought a revolution to gain independence from tyranny, could be called our Moses Generation, because it was Moses who liberated the Israelites from the tyranny of Egypt. Later generations of Americans were also nicknamed according to the way history defined them. The children of the Depression had very distinct values formed through experiences of extreme scarcity and deprivation. The Second World War generation are remembered as the Greatest Generation for the sacrifices they made to defend freedom and defeat fascism. The label applied to my own generation—Baby Boomers—reflected both the accelerated birthrate in the wake of World War II and the economic growth of that era. Since then, Generation X, Generation Y and the Millennials, (sometimes referred to as Generation Me) have taken their place on the stage of history.

Each generation of Israelites were challenged to remember all God had done for them in past generations, to put their faith in God for the future of their own generation, and to relinquish their affinity for the worship of false gods. Like them, we are challenged to self-examination when it comes to our fidelity to the ideals that others before us sacrificed to preserve, and our faithfulness to being the people of mercy and justice that God calls us to be. The message that noble words like justice and equality that define us as a people also stand as witnesses against those who mock them through greed, bigotry lack of compassion for others. But they also stand as witnesses that I—I personally--bear responsibility for, and am accountable for, the sins of my household. If not by my direct participation in those sins, then at least by my silence or inaction. That this is as true for all households to which I belong, be they family, church or nation. And, that no land is truly a Promised Land until it is a land of promise for everyone.

The Generations of the Bible were put on the spot and made to choose which gods they would follow. Would they serve the God who had led them from slavery to freedom? Would they serve the God who had taken them from being homeless refugees and provided them with a land to call their own? Or would they worship other gods, who would lead them to abandon the path of righteousness made known through the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? It was the critical decision with which that Joshua Generation had to grapple.

In a way, every generation, whatever nickname is given to them, has to answer for itself what choices it will make. Will we serve the old gods of racism, divisiveness and intolerance? Or will we serve the God who breaks down the walls of hostility. The God who reconciles. The God who shows no partiality. Will we serve the old gods of self-interest and greed, whose cynical creeds continue to teach that it is every man and woman for themselves, while turning a blind eye to the widening gap between privileged and underprivileged? Or will we worship the God of abundant provision, of grace and mercy, of peace and justice? The God who encourages us to be people of generosity and sharing; who reminds us that you and I are our brother's and our sister's keeper?

Like the Israelites, the words written in our revered covenants stand as witness against us when we fail to honor them. Words that declare "self-evident truths, that all people are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." Words that set as our goal the formation of "a more perfect union." Words that veterans, living and dead, have sacrificed to defend.

I wonder what nickname will someday be affixed to the next generation. How will the character of that generation be shaped by a global pandemic, epic natural disasters spawned by climate change, and bitter political divisiveness? Will they reject facts and ignore their God given responsibility to be stewards of God's Creation, and not just consumers? Or will they roll up their sleeves and refuse to pass

global problems onto their children and grandchildren? Will they embrace the effort it takes to love neighbor as self or will they tolerate injustice and villainize those who think differently than they do? Joshua knew how important a role moral accountability and personal sacrifice plays in transforming the world for the better. To the Israelites he declared, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve."

Actually, we do choose, every single day, whether we will serve God or serve some false god of our own invention. We may not choose it with our lips, or as a conscious decision. But we choose it with our actions and inactions. Joshua left no doubt as to where he stood. "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord," he said.

If the next generation answers as Joshua did; if they opt for the greater good over the selfishness that led to the nickname of Generation Me; if they choose working together over division, someday history just might remember them as "Generation We."

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