

**Joshua 24: 14-28**  
**Renewing the Covenant**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Lynn Vahle**  
**Sept. 9, 2007**

This morning just about now the Broncos are getting ready to kickoff their football season. While down at Civic Center Park they have just kicked off the Colorado Aids Walk. This week Fred Thompson kicked off his run for the White House on the Tonight show. And the change in weather and pollen count has kicked off allergies for many of us. 'Tis the season. So we have joined the crowd and called this kickoff Sunday since many of the programs that took a little hiatus during the summer are starting up again. Even though it isn't New Year's Day and it isn't the first Sunday in Advent when the church's calendar officially begins it is nonetheless the start of a new year, the program year. And with that in mind I chose our text for this morning.

When Moses died the mantle of leadership fell on the shoulders of a man named Joshua. The people stood poised on the threshold of the land they believed God had given to them. Moses had led them out of Egypt and had safely shepherded them through the 40 years in the wilderness. But he would not be able to enter the land with them. He died after looking over the land from a high mountain. It was for Joshua to plan and execute the strategies that would give possession of the land to the Israelites. In our text this morning we are near the end of Joshua's life. The land is settled. Every tribe has a portion of the land on one side of the Jordan or the other and they live in peace. And so Joshua calls the tribes together in Shechem and he reminds them of all the great things God has done for them along the way since God first called Abraham to leave Ur.

Then Joshua says to the people, “Choose who you are going to serve - the gods of your ancestors, the gods of the people who lived in this land before us, or the God who has brought us into this land”. It was not the first time the question had been put to the people. Moses had posed the question when they began the journey, along the way, and before his own death. The people had repeatedly chosen to serve Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not so much a question signaling a critical point of decision as it is a renewal of their commitment.

In fact, after Joshua and throughout the Old Testament the question was raised for the people at the beginning of every year. Part of the celebration of the new year was the covenant renewal ceremony. It wasn't a once and forever kind of thing. It was important enough to be renewed every year. It was important enough for the people to consider every year where their loyalties laid, how they would live their lives, and whom they would worship.

In our text Joshua poses the question and the people quickly give the expected response, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods”. But Joshua warns them not to take this so lightly. In effect, he says to them “think about this, because if you say you are going to serve the Lord and then don't you are inviting destruction on yourselves”. They assure him they are sincere and he warns them “you are witnesses against yourselves”. Then the text says he made a covenant with them and made statutes and ordinances for them”. These statutes and ordinances were part of every covenant or treaty and they were the specifics of what each party in the covenant could expect of the other. The exact terms are not spelled out for us but the people agree to do certain things in response to the faithfulness and mercy of God.

I think its interesting that the gods vying for the loyalty and worship of the people are the gods your ancestors worshipped in another place, the gods of the people who used to possess this land, and the God who had traveled with them through the desert. In ancient times gods were thought to be territorial and belonging to a certain nation. So the gods of Egypt could not be worshipped in Israel, and the gods worshipped by Abraham's family in Ur could not follow them to the land of Cannan. Yahweh had led them through the wilderness so obviously could move from place to place but when they were settled in the land they too believed that their god was connected to the nation. And when exile came they found it hard to worship Yahweh in a foreign land.

Today is the beginning of a new year for us. And I'm assuming that most if not all of you are here because somewhere along the way you have made a covenant with God - at baptism, at confirmation, when you joined a church, at the time of a conversion experience, when you were married, or when you were ordained as an officer of the church. And maybe you have treated that covenant as a once in a lifetime kind of thing. No need to repeat it. Sort of like the husband who says to his wife, "I told you I loved you once, isn't that enough?" But I think the record of the Bible would teach us that we need to make that covenant again and again throughout our lives. Circumstances change, we change, the gods that vie for attention change and we need to get clear at least once a year who we are going to serve.

Sometimes we are still serving the God that our families served. Religion is something our family does and we are carrying on a family tradition. We do not have a personal, vital and living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We are living on the faith of another generation, another time. We go through the motions but there is very little commitment.

At other times we serve the gods of the culture in which we live. We may go to church but our true worship is reserved for family, success, power, wealth, education, or status. That is what demands our time, our money, our energy and is the object of our devotion. God is just one item on a long list of things that help us get ahead in life.

And so I think that as we kickoff a new year we have to do more than just welcome new programs. It is a time for each of us to carefully consider and renew the covenant we have with God. A time to review our own history with God. To write down, if necessary, the ways God has pulled you through some very tough times. The blessings God has brought into your life. The gifts God has so freely given you. The forgiveness God continually bathes you in. The love of God that always surrounds you.

Then you have to decide if this year you will serve that God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, or the gods of your family, or the gods of the culture in which you live. It is not an easy decision and you will not be 100% successful. There will be times when your true devotion will go to other gods. But I think there is great power in making a choice, voicing that choice out loud, and setting it as the compass for your life. I've just read a book on management in which the author says that the most important thing in any business is to be very clear about your purpose and to restate it frequently. I think it is equally important to start every day reminding yourself that "I serve a risen and living Lord".

Once you have considered your options and made your choice the covenant renewal ceremony calls for "statutes and ordinances". What are the specific things you will do this year to serve the Lord? Remember you are re-newing your covenant so you can't just say, "Same thing I did last year and the year before and the year before". Choose some activity that

will stretch you, cause you to grow, give you a new perspective on worship. But don't make it so difficult that you will never do it. It is a transaction you are making with God - a way to renew the covenant God has made with you. "Lord, this year I will .....". Then seal it in prayer. Commit yourself before God to serve the Lord through at least one activity. You will be your own witness.

"Choose this day whom you will serve - the gods your ancestors served...or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living...or the God who brought you up into this good place".