

“CHOOSE WHOM YOU WILL SERVE”

Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

November 9, 2008

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 and Matthew 25:1-13

Let us begin with prayer:

God be patient with us as we strive to hear your Word for us this day. Our minds can sometimes get cluttered, and our hearts distracted by the concerns of the world. Grant us a clearer vision, a more focused Spirit, and a gracious heart to receive what message you have for us. Amen.

In the four years that I have lived on the north-western edge of the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, I have never waited in line to vote. In fact, not only have I never waited in line, I have even been the only voter in a gym filled with bored, election workers. So I didn't know what to expect when I approached P.S. 22 at 7:45 in the morning on Tuesday. I expected more people, for sure, but I was pleasantly surprised when I couldn't see the end of the line stretching down the block. I couldn't see the end, because it wrapped around the corner and down to the end of the next block. My second surprise that morning was the mood of those waiting in line. New Yorkers don't typically queue well, as anyone here who has ever waited in the security line at LaGuardia, or at the Post Office on April 14th, or even the Whole Foods at Union Square has witnessed. But this was something else. People were smiling, chatting on their phones or with the person next to them in line. Old and young, black, white, South Asian, Caribbean, experienced voters and new voters. Not 18 year-old new voters. Middle-aged and elderly folks who were voting for the very first time. Teenagers stood around in clumps on the corner, watching the line with interest. Drivers stopped to roll down their car windows and call out to friends. Even once I reached the crush of the school gymnasium, with what seemed to be a dozen different lines

wrapped around each other like a nest of snakes, I heard no yelling, no cursing, no exasperation toward the poll workers. When I finally walked out of P.S. 22 at 9:15, my only disappointment was that they had run out of those 'I Voted' stickers.

A close friend in Brooklyn Heights was feeling under the weather on Tuesday, weak and tired and daunted by the three hour line that awaited her, yet so determined was she to cast her ballot that she brought her own chair from home and sat comfortably on the street with a book and her Blackberry. You may all have stories like this from Tuesday, about waiting in line to vote, about the sense of hopefulness and determination, expectation and passion that pervaded the long lines and crowded gyms. A cynic might compare these scenes to an episode of the Twilight Zone, but most of us felt an optimism unheard of in the American electoral process.

In an article in the New York Times last week, Frank Bruni, the restaurant reviewer, not Frank Rich, the op-ed columnist, (confusing, I know) offered a pre-election summary of what was to come. "On Tuesday, the nation's fretful, hopeful voters will finally have their say, and none of the rigorously calibrated polls or demographically incisive analysts out there can tell us with any certainty what will happen... [but] we don't need to know the answers to be certain of this much: no matter the outcome, it will be the climax of one of the most extraordinary presidential elections in this nation's 232-year history..."¹ Well, the voters did indeed have their say, and extraordinary the election truly was. Record voter turnout comes almost as no surprise in light of the record participation that preceded it, both in time spent and money donated, by citizens during these past twenty-odd months. The long lines at polling places only confirmed what we already knew, that this election was profoundly important, and people took up the cause with a renewed spirit of optimism and a clarified sense of what really matters.

This morning, though, I am feeling a little election hang-over, wrung out by the anxiety and high energy of these final weeks, dehydrated because I spent more time flipping from NBC to PBS on my television (this is what those of us without cable have to do), than properly hydrating, and with a little headache from the harsh light of the computer as I read yet another political blog. But I'm also a bit sad that the whole thing is over, mostly because I am going to miss the liveliness on the streets, the shared conversations on bus and subway, in bodega and Laundromat, conducted with such enthusiasm and emanating from such unlikely sources. When again will we see such collective passion? When again will people line up uncomplainingly to choose that which they believe in? When again will we stake a claim for these beliefs with such careful preparation and sincerity?

Our texts this morning point, each in their own way, towards a theological situation that would warrant the kind of response that we witnessed on a political level in this country last week. Joshua, in the Old Testament, and Jesus, in the telling of a parable, illustrate for us the ways in which choosing our God, and claiming our faith, are decisions of the highest magnitude, requiring a response as passionate as what we have seen in recent days, and even more so. For what is faith if it is not, at its core, a life-altering choice when everything, including our very life, is at stake? Who is God if choosing God is not a momentous and consequential act that changes us permanently?

At the end of his life, before the wanderings of Israel had concluded and before passing the baton to Joshua, Moses said to the people, "Hear the words I enjoin upon you this day, that

you may commend them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life.”²

The book of Joshua continues the story of the wandering Israelites where Deuteronomy leaves off. When Moses died, on a mountain overlooking the promised land, onto which he would never set foot, the Lord anointed Joshua to lead the people beyond the Jordan, in a scene reminiscent of the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea, to the land which God had promised to their ancestors. Joshua, as a biblical text, is primarily a book of conquest, detailing the bloody sack of Jericho, the capture of the city Ai, a great battle with five Canaanite chieftains, and a climactic, concluding engagement that resulted in the complete destruction of Canaanite power in Palestine. The second half of the book describes, in excruciating detail, how the people Israel divided the conquered land among its twelve tribes, completing a journey that began in a far off place, in a far off time. In the final chapter of the book, at the very end of Joshua’s life, after the wanderings of Israel had concluded, Joshua said to the people, “Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and faithfulness... And if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve.”

“For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life” said Moses. “Choose this day whom you will serve” said Joshua. Let’s ponder these words in our hearts for a moment. ‘The law of God is no trifle for you, but it is your life.’ ‘Choose this day whom you will serve.’ The decision to choose God and claim faith is the most important decision you will ever make in your life. It cannot be trivialized, or taken lightly. It is no trifling thing. This is what Moses and Joshua say to the people Israel as they near the completion of a long and wearying journey from slavery in Egypt to liberation, through the wilderness, to the promised land.

The message is no less relevant for us today, tempered though it is by the passage of time and by lives of relative comfort and abundance in comparison to those early wanderers. But we are, in truth, weary from our own journeys. God has promised to lead us each through our own wilderness, providing sustenance to sate our hunger and slake our thirst; God has promised to deliver us each from bondage to freedom; God has promised to each of us a safe harbor from the storm; a resting place for our weary bodies; a sanctuary from all who would seek to harm us. And we are asked only one thing in return: to choose whom we will serve, and to know that the choice entails our whole life.

At the Covenant Network Conference in Minneapolis this weekend, the systematic theologian, William Stacy Johnson, summed up this covenant between God and God's people in this way: God has resolved not to be God without us. God has a stake in the fulfillment of this covenant as great as our own. God desires our participation in the covenant, for God is genuinely and sincerely and authentically engaged in human life.³ It is a mind-boggling proposition- God needs us as much as we need God, for God has resolved not to be God without us. Of course the other side of this covenant is that we must choose to be just as genuinely and sincerely and authentically engaged in our relationship to God. It is a covenant of mutuality, a two-way street, a give and take. For isn't that the God whom we choose to serve- God who is not so much omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, but God who is 'for us, with us and among us'? And if that is the God whom we choose to serve, much is required of us.

This may be why Joshua tested the Israelites with his query about their loyalty. With great enthusiasm, the Israelites confessed their desire to serve God, because God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, guided them through the wilderness, and brought them to the promised land. God did this, and God did that, and as long as God lived up to God's promises,

the people would pledge their fidelity. And Joshua, responded, ‘Nope, you can’t serve God. For God will demand much from you, and God will not turn a blind eye to your transgressions and unfaithfulness. If God is staking a claim on this relationship, so must you- with your faithfulness and steadfastness (even when things aren’t going your way!) and equal participation in this covenant.’

OK, so we probably won’t be asking Joshua to lead a new members’ class or join the Membership/Fellowship Committee, but he proclaims a truth we need to hear. Choosing God and claiming our faith requires a lot. Choosing God is not giving God permission to heap blessings upon us by virtue of our confession; choosing God is not quick and easy protection from the fears and dangers of this world; choosing God is not an unconditional promise of safety and sanctuary, where no harm can ever come to us. And choosing God is not something we do just once. Choosing God is a promise to be a mutual participant in a covenant of faithfulness and abiding love. Choosing God is committing to a lifetime spent pursuing justice; a lifetime spent proclaiming the good news of a God who is for us, with us and among us; choosing God requires a lifetime of patience, perseverance and faith when our journey in the wilderness lasts longer than we expect, and the memories of bondage seem more real than future hope of a promised land.

Choosing God means being prepared to wait. The five, wise bridesmaids in Jesus’ parable in the Gospel of Matthew understand this. We don’t know if they expected the groom to be late to the wedding, we only know that they came prepared nonetheless, ready for any eventuality regarding the arrival of the groom. And when the groom was delayed, they rested, along with the other young women, but they rested in the sure knowledge that when the time came for the doors to the wedding feast to be opened wide, they would be ready to enter in and

celebrate. They trusted unwaveringly that the one for whom they waited would not disappoint them; and they believed steadfastly that they had a place at the banquet table.

Would that we might more closely resemble those wise bridesmaids, waiting with patience and in trust for our Savior to return to us. Would that we might be more ready and willing to do whatever is necessary as we live into the faithful covenant that God has made with us. Would that our life in the Church might more resemble last Tuesday!

Can you imagine people lining up patiently and excitedly for hours to step inside a sanctuary and choose God? Wouldn't we love to see our churches experience record turnouts? Can you imagine breaking new records in stewardship giving, not just with big donors, but with increased numbers of individuals giving small, but sacrificial, offerings? Wouldn't we love to have the people on the edge of their pews, waiting to find out what God has to say? Can you even imagine?

Ah! But look at you. It looks like Joshua has already made an appearance in this place. Mark, Jon, do you see this? I think Joshua's been here when we weren't looking. Joshua snuck into our midst and demanded that each of you choose this day whom you will serve. And you made your choice. And when Joshua questioned your commitment, you said it again, "We choose to serve God." You came prepared- I see now that your lamps glow brightly and flasks of oil rest beside you- you are ready to wait out the long journey in the wilderness, in whatever form it takes in your lives, faithful to God not just for what God has promised to do for you, but faithful to God whose very presence with us and among us, requires much from you in return.

Your waiting is not anxious and fretful. Your waiting is joyful and busy. You wait in busy preparation, serving on committees; volunteering in the homeless shelter; pledging your time, your gifts, and your resources; singing songs of praise; hearing the Word proclaimed; praying with hearts open for the Spirit to enter in.

Can you see into the distance? There is a figure approaching, a familiar silhouette framed by your lamps' glow. And the doors to the banquet, can you hear them creak and groan as they begin to open? The feast is almost prepared, the one for whom we wait is almost here, and we are on the very edge of our pews- ready, willing, hopeful.

¹ Frank Bruni, "The Year of Living on the Edge of our Seats," *New York Times*, November 2, 2008 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/02/weekinreview/02bruni.html>).

² Deuteronomy 32:46b-47.

³ William Stacy Johnson, Covenant Network Conference, Minneapolis, MN, November 6, 2008.