

“Taking back our story: A People of Allegiance”

Rev. Robert Galloway

Date: September 15, 2024



We continue our sermon series titled “Take Back Our Story.” This series focuses on the ways that God’s people have claimed their true identity amid the noise of others telling them who they should or are.

The aim is to help all of us to live grounded in our faith and in ourselves as Children of God. We are looking at a passage of scripture that God’s people have used to tell others who they are and remind themselves who they are.

Our Scripture today comes from the final chapter of the Book of Joshua. Joshua became the leader of the Israelites upon Moses’ death. Joshua led God’s people into the promised land. He led them at the destruction of the walls of Jericho and other important moments in the early days of life in the promised land.

The passage we hear today is at the end of the book and at the end of Joshua’s life. As a final act as leader and prophet, Joshua calls all of Israel to gather at Shechem where he recounts the familiar story of Israel’s history beginning with Abraham. In Joshua, the history is told to emphasize God’s involvement and initiative that led God’s people to the moment. Joshua, as the prophet and speaker for God, wants Israelites to recognize God’s hand in all things.

At the conclusion, Joshua calls for the people to renew the covenant and commit to serving God and rejecting all other gods. We pick up at Joshua’s command and the people’s response.

Joshua 24:14-28

14“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 Now if you are unwilling 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.”

16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; 18 and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

19 But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. 20 If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” 21 And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” 22 Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” 23 He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” 24 The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” 25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. 26 Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. 27 Joshua said to all the people, “See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.” 28 So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

At the end of his life, Joshua called the people of Israel to renew their covenant with God, harkening back to the foundational moment at Mount Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments. Joshua’s question to the Israelites was direct and challenging: “Will you serve the Lord?” This question wasn’t merely rhetorical. It was a reminder, a warning, and a call to decision. And it is a question we must answer, not once, but every day: “Will you serve the Lord?”

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If the answer was yes, then that would require a certain kind of life. Joshua first tells the Israelites to put away the false gods that their ancestors served. The Israelites were surrounded by cultures that worshiped many gods, each believed to have specific powers or authority over one aspect of life. It seemed logical to worship multiple gods to cover all areas of life. But the Lord, our God, reigns over all things. God is the only one worthy of our devotion. Joshua is asking, “Will you give up the false gods and devote yourself entirely to the Lord?”

We, too, are tempted by false gods. While our neighbors might not be praying to one god for the harvest and the other for rain, we are equally tempted by false gods. They may take the form of wealth, status, success, comfort, or even security. These false gods lure us into believing that they can offer fulfillment, but they never satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. I won’t even begin to name them all because we know what forms they can take. If I began listing them, we would run out of time, and I might never name the idol that is most difficult for you.

Joshua presents the Israelites—and us—with a similar choice. He’s not asking for halfway measures or superficial devotion. When Joshua says, “Choose this day whom you will serve,” he’s asking for full allegiance to God. There’s no room for divided loyalties. You cannot serve both the Lord and false gods.

This question can feel difficult, even daunting. Today, if someone asked you to join a movement, you’d likely ask, “Why? What’s in it for me? How much time will it take? What will it cost?” These questions help us make informed decisions and avoid mistakes. They help us discern which causes align with our values. Yet when we ask, “Why should we serve God?” something about the question feels off. It feels transactional, like we’re bargaining in a negotiation. But here’s the good news: God knows we ask these questions in our hearts, and God has already answered them.

Through Joshua, God reminds the Israelites why they should serve the Lord. God lists all the ways He has been steadfast in His relationship with them: delivering them from Egypt, protecting them through the wilderness, and bringing them into the Promised Land. God doesn’t compel service out of guilt or demand it in exchange for blessings. Instead, God invites the people to respond to God’s faithfulness with their own devotion.

This is where Joshua’s tone shifts. If this were a sales pitch, God would have painted a perfect picture of why the Israelites should pledge allegiance. But Joshua ruins the ask with a few jabs at the buyers and some terrible terms and conditions. Joshua follows up with a stark warning. He describes God as “jealous” and tells the people that if they forsake the Lord, God will turn and do them harm. Joshua is so sure the people will fail that he asks them to become witnesses against themselves.

Despite Joshua’s harsh terms, the people still respond with a resounding “Yes!” They choose to serve the Lord, fully aware of the weight of their decision. Why? Because their hearts have been moved by God’s steadfast love—not out of fear, but out of a deep recognition of who God is and what God has done.

Joshua then lays out what allegiance to God entails. First, he calls the people to revere the Lord. In this context, reverence means more than fear. It refers to the internal devotion and piety expected of God’s people. For us, this is our internal spirituality—the prayers we offer, the time we spend meditating on God’s word, and the ways we center ourselves in Christ.

Next, Joshua calls the people to serve the Lord with sincerity and faithfulness. The Hebrew word for “serve” here refers specifically to acts of worship and devotion performed in the temple. It’s not just about internal faith but external action. Our acts of service—whether in worship, in helping others, or in the daily tasks of life—should be tangible expressions of our devotion to God. Reverence ensures that service is not empty or shallow, while service gives reverence a grounded and real existence. Both are essential to a life of faith.

Finally, Joshua calls for the rejection of all idols. This has been a stumbling block for Israel throughout their history, and it remains a challenge for us. We are constantly tempted to let other things take God’s place in our hearts. But when we pledge allegiance to God, we commit to giving God our undivided worship and loyalty.

One of the most striking parts of Joshua’s speech is his description of God as “jealous.” Jerome Creach suggests that “jealous” could be better translated as “zealous.” God’s zeal for His people is not a possessive jealousy, but a passionate, unrelenting commitment to the relationship. It is the zeal of a parent for a child or a shepherd for their flock. God’s jealousy is born out of love—a love that grieves when we turn away and celebrates when we return.

This zealous love is the foundation of the covenant. Like any meaningful relationship, it requires both sides to be fully invested. If one partner in a marriage or friendship acts with disregard for the bond, the other naturally feels hurt or betrayed. In the same way, when we disregard our relationship with God by pursuing false gods, we provoke God’s righteous jealousy. But because God is zealous for us, He does not cut us off when we fall short. Instead, He continually invites us back into relationship, offering forgiveness and grace.

Consider the story of Eric Liddell, the Scottish runner immortalized in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell was a committed Christian who believed that his athletic talents were a gift from God. But when the 1924 Olympics rolled around, he faced a dilemma: the heats for his best event, the 100 meters, were scheduled for a Sunday. As a devout Christian, Liddell had a deep conviction about honoring the Sabbath, and he refused to compete on that day.

Liddell’s decision stunned the sports world. Many people thought he was foolish to pass up the chance for a gold medal. But for Liddell, serving God came first, even if it meant sacrificing a lifelong dream. His allegiance to God was greater than his desire for athletic glory.

In the end, Liddell ran in the 400 meters—a race he hadn’t trained for—and won the gold medal. His story became an enduring symbol of faith, commitment, and what it means to live out one’s beliefs, even when the world doesn’t understand. Liddell’s life reminds us that true allegiance to God is not always easy, but it is always worth it. It requires us to make tough choices, but those choices flow from a heart that has been captured by God’s zealous love.

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Joshua’s challenge is as relevant today as it was in ancient Israel: “Will you serve the Lord?” The people responded, not out of fear of punishment, but out of a deep sense of gratitude for God’s steadfast love. And so must we. Our reverence, service, and rejection of false gods are not conditions for earning God’s favor; they are our response to God’s unearned grace. We follow God’s commands not because we are afraid of losing His love, but because we are overwhelmed by His love. We respond with our whole selves—our hearts, our hands, and our lives.

Like the Israelites, we face the same question every day: “Will you serve the Lord?” It’s not a one-time decision, but a daily choice. Will we serve God by letting our acts of service be accompanied by a heart that seeks God in every person we encounter? Will we let our faith be more than words, allowing it to shape every aspect of our lives?

And what about the false gods that demand our attention and loyalty? Will we reject the voices that try to speak for us, that claim to offer us everything but in the end leave us empty? Will we walk away from the idols of wealth, power, and self-interest, and instead choose to serve the Lord with sincerity and faith?

As we reflect on Joshua’s challenge, let us be a people who not only serve the Lord in word, but who live out our allegiance to God in every aspect of our lives. May our voices join with those of generations past, present, and future, declaring, “We will serve the Lord, for He is our God.”