

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Pentecost 13, August 22, 2021
Proper 16

“Once to Everyone Comes a Moment”

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22;
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

One of my favorite hymns from the old Methodist Hymnal was the poem of James Russell Lowell, written in the late 1800s and set to music. “Once to every man and nation Comes the moment to decide, In the strife of truth with falsehood, For the good or evil side...”¹

Their new hymnal has omitted this hymn. It is considered problematical on several accounts. The first line. Addressing only men? You’ve got to be kidding in this progressive day. Secondly, it’s considered bad theology. God’s grace is available every moment. Not “one and done.”

Still...

¹ *The Book of Hymns* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1964), 242.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune, Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.”²

Though it cuts against the grain, here is a truth. There are critical moments of decision throughout life. Yes, there are sometimes “do-overs.” But, often, timing is everything.

Hebrew scripture recounts such a moment in the book of Joshua.

“Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, ‘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. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve...’”³

John’s gospel puts a similar question to those who would follow Jesus.

“Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one what would betray him...So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’”

Crowds gathered, but when the moment to decide came, many turned away. Life’s choices, sometimes critical, life determining decisions, confront us at seminal moments – to study for that chem exam, or go to the pool hall with our buddies. Continuing that video game, letting our mind get sucked into oblivion, or getting about that job interview.

Are those few moments, maybe becoming hours and days, in front of the TV life enhancing? Or even a good use of time in the grand scheme of things, or a stumble off into “shallows” and “miseries”? Or just a mindless distraction while awaiting the Grim Reaper?

² Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act-IV, Scene-III, Lines 218-224.

³ Joshua 24:1-18, NRSV.

A life informed by Gospel Truth, centered in the generous abundance of Christ, leads far beyond the “shallows.” Such, when informing life’s critical choices, leads on to the road of blessedness.

While I was in West Virginia working on House of Hope, we had our newly elected county sheriff up to the facility we are in the process of purchasing. It was a cold, wet rainy day. I noted on the back of his county car was our national motto, “In God we trust.”

My thought went to the sidearm he had strapped to his belt. Where was the “real” trust, I wondered. God or the 9mm? It gets murky. That was the choice before the officer who shot Breonna Taylor in her sleep. And the choice of another officer who blindly fired into the home of a neighbor. In whom or what was the trust placed in serving a no-knock warrant in Louisville, Tennessee that day?

Fateful, life altering choices. Maybe, James Russell Lowell got it right? Joshua at Shechem had the choice right? Just whom are we serving?

Professor Eddie Glaude of Princeton University, reflecting on the unwillingness of many to get their COVID-19 vaccinations, let alone take the simple precaution of wearing a mask or keeping social distance, nailed the operating ethic of our times:

“For forty years we have been governed by ideology that has turned us into self-interested persons in pursuit of our own aims and ends. We can live in our gated communities where we’re okay with the gaps between those who have and don’t have. We were okay with the argument that government could have no role in our lives. And what it has produced is a planet on the brink and no genuine concept of the public good, and a pandemic of selfishness in the midst of a virus that is rampaging through the country. There is a dividing line, and we have to be on the right side.”⁴

⁴ Eddie Glaude, MSNBC, August 9, 2021.

Choose this day, what you will follow – the selfish notions of your own ill-informed fears or wise counsel in the spirit of the Lord of all Life. Too many are choosing the plastic god of ignorance and fear – the god of death.

One Texas county administrator, recently interviewed, almost in tears said that he was at his wits end. There was not a single pediatric bed left in his hospital (or in the entire state of Texas, for that matter). With cars and ambulances lined up at the emergency entrance, “all I can tell parents is to wait out here in line and wait for some other child to die. We have no room.”

With the pandemic raging and hospital beds full, in Dallas County, Texas, “there are ‘zero ICU beds left for children,’ county judge Clay Jenkins said in a news conference Friday morning.”⁵

“That means if your child's in a car wreck, if your child has a congenital heart defect or something and needs an ICU bed, or more likely if they have Covid and need an ICU bed, we don't have one. Your child will wait for another child to die,” Jenkins said.⁶

And in the midst of this raging medical crisis their governor, Gregg Abbott, absolutely forbids school districts from requiring masks or other sensible precautions. Heaven forbid, mandating vaccinations. Horrors! An infringement on liberty and freedom. So, you’re free to go out to the hospital parking lot – and wait for some kid to die. Yours or another.

There are indeed, some choices we make that are once-in-a-lifetime choices. No do-overs. Texas has chosen the small god of fear, ignorance, and political aspiration over the generosity and humility of Jesus. Joshua got it right. Jesus got it right. What do you trust? Whom do you follow? Didn’t say this was easy. Spiritual discernment is an essential. But, get it wrong and bad stuff happens. Stuff that flows downhill.

⁵ Carma Hassan and Christina Maxouris, CNN, Friday, August 13, 2021

⁶ Ibid.

These past few days the world has been transfixed by the chaos and violence flowing out of Afghanistan. The scenes are both horrifying and inspiring. Heroism has marked the day as has deceit and treachery. Folly has had its day.

The most enlightened and frank rendering of America's years in Afghanistan, I have found, comes from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko. He was interviewed the other evening on the Rachel Maddow show.⁷

His report is a no-holds-barred, forthright assessment of our participation in that war and the reconstruction efforts. Face it, America does not do reconstruction well, maybe with two exceptions: Germany and Japan after WWII. We couldn't even manage Reconstruction in our own nation after the Civil War. We abandoned the South to Jim Crow and the KKK.

The grift that he uncovered is staggering. In one case we bought cargo planes for the Afghan air force. The planes were so deficient that the lot of them had been characterized as a "death trap." We spent \$486 million on these planes that no one could fly. Dare fly.

"However, we did recoup some of this investment. Sixteen of the planes were sold for the grand sum of \$32,000. That's six cents per pound."

ProPublica contains much of the meat of this report. The failure to learn the basic lessons we should have learned decades earlier in Vietnam stagger the moral imagination. As in Vietnam we knew almost nothing about the culture or history. There's a reason that Afghanistan has been called "the graveyard of empires." Our abysmal ignorance paralleled that of the British Empire which suffered a similar humiliating defeat in that unforgiving battlefield over a century earlier.⁸

⁷ The Rachel Maddow Show, MSNBC, August 19, 2021.

⁸ Megan McCloskey, Tobin Asher, Lena Groeger and Sisi Wei, "We Blew \$17 Billion in Afghanistan. How Would You Have Spent It?" *ProPublica*, and *Christine Lee, Special to ProPublica*, December 17, 2015

In the mad scramble to get out of there, now that President Biden has declared an end to our involvement in that war, we retreat in shame. Disorder overwhelms our retreat, with the only remaining airport in U.S. hands mobbed by the desperate. People clinging to the sides of departing aircraft falling to their deaths. Thousands of American citizens stranded in country along with our Afghan allies. All left to the tender mercies of the Taliban.

A prime concern is for the women and girls who had no say in any of this. They weren't present in the original negotiations with the Taliban. Heck, even the Afghan government wasn't invited to the negotiations. This was an "I-alone-can-fix-it" operation. We see how that worked out. They weren't considered in the plans for evacuation either.

Not one woman present seems to have had a say in how their fate would be meted out. Highly educated, professional women, in all areas of public life – now to waste their skills and ambitions, stuck as housewives. Girls forced into unwanted marriages. Actually, sold as virtual sex slaves.

We were "the best and the brightest?" Not when you leave the women out!

A choice for the Lord would have been a choice for ALL. However, as my mother would say, "No use crying over spilt milk." Though this disaster is far beyond that poor metaphor. Spoko's word of caution – do not EVER, EVER think that we have the wisdom to engineer another culture, to do nation building. We don't have the humility or the patience. Look up his report. It is the great sadness of an inconvenient truth we have ignored to our peril and shame. Unfortunately, far too many have died for this mistake.

Chose this day whom you will serve: the Lord or blind national ambition. The Spirit of Truth and Life, or pitiful folly. "When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?"

Those seeking an alternative will do well to read and meditate night and day on the words of Micah: "And what does the Lord require? Do justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly with Your God."⁹

⁹ Micah 6:8., Author's translation.

In these words is Salvation. In them, Life Abundant. In them is the avoidance of a whole bunch of Stupid Stuff. May we ever humbly follow in the path of Peace. "Grant us courage for the living of these days." Amen.