

**DISCOVERING GOD: BANKING ON GOD'S TRACK RECORD**  
**JOSHUA 24: 1, 14-28**  
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People and organizations have defining moments. Even nations. One such moment for the United States was the *Gettysburg Address*. Recent scholarship shows how Lincoln, in that three minute speech, re-established the covenant of the nation with the core vision of its founders.

But what was in the founders' view a freedom limited to some people became in Lincoln's interpretation freedom for all people. That speech alone may have elevated Lincoln to the top of presidential leaders in our history.

In the crisis of the Civil War Lincoln reconnected the issues of his day with the core vision of the republic. In so doing, he enabled the nation to rediscover our calling and purpose.

I'd like to begin a sermon series today that will consider, over four weeks, four ways in which we can discover or rediscover God.

The theme of the biblical story today is that we rediscover God when we recommit to God at times of crisis in our lives. These crisis points are defining moments, crucibles in which a person or a people are spiritually reconstituted.

Like Lincoln at Gettysburg the story of Joshua at Shechem is one such moment for Israel.

This account takes us back to the very beginning of the Hebrew people. It is a time before the prophets and kings when patriarchal leaders of the tribes were the vehicle through which God shaped the nation.

Joshua, because he was a successful military strategist and general received the mantle of leadership from Moses. It is after his victorious campaign over the Canaanites that today's episode takes place.

His challenge to the tribes of Israel to serve God is more than reverse psychology. When he says, "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. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn, do you harm, and consume you" when he makes this speech Joshua is revealing a deep and disturbing truth – the people have not been faithful.

Nor is this a surprise given this early period of Israel's history. Most of the people still carried the gods and idols of worship they brought from their pre-Abrahamic faith.

So Joshua seizes the opportunity to place a theological fork in the road before the conquered land is divided. You can choose the old gods of your former life or the God who brought you victory over the Canaanites and gave you this land.

And of course they all choose Yahweh. So Joshua signs the covenant with a shrewd oath. "You are witnesses against yourselves," he says. "that you have chosen the Lord." He then places a large stone at Shechem to mark the occasion that all would remember the covenant they made that day.

Consider the parallel with Lincoln. What happened at Gettysburg with 20,000 in attendance and all the media of the day was a rebirth of the nation.

Before Gettysburg it was the Union states versus the Confederate states. After the Gettysburg Address it was the Union states upholding the core vision of 1776 against the evils of slavery.

Before Shechem it was the tribes of Israel versus the Canaanites. After Shechem it was the tribes of Israel upholding the core vision of God's covenant with Abraham to be a blessing to the world.

Lincoln and Joshua enable their people to rediscover the faith of previous generations in their own time. And that is the challenge of faith – to see how it applies to our life today, to hear where God calls us to engage the world just as he called our ancestors before us.

Every day is potentially a defining moment for faith. And the question is how does this God who has been at work in my own past or the history of my people apply to the life we are living now?

Will this old faith work in a world of terrorism? Does this faith apply to a nation buffeted by natural disasters? What does God's ancient track record have to say to a world of science and reason?

Let me tell you about Paul Auster, author of the book all of Buffalo was reading this summer. He spoke at Trinity Episcopal Church last Wednesday. His book *The Invention of Solitude* is a lovely autobiographical reflection.

It was the book that put Auster on the literary map in 1982. His writing since that first success is wonderfully diverse. He has screenplays, poetry, literary criticism, and fantasy to his credit.

Last Wednesday someone asked him about the highs and lows of writing. The question was, 'how do you practice the writing art?' And Auster's response was "every book is a new book. I have to create it all over again. But the difference now that I am older is that I don't panic like I used to when I hit a dry spell. I have learned to trust that if there is a book in me trying to be written it will figure itself out and speak through me.

Listening to Auster, I thought that's how our faith works. Every day is a new day to rely upon the faith of our ancestors in the present circumstances of life.

We've never faced exactly this situation, just as the writer has never written exactly this book before. But the process can be trusted. We trust God to speak to us through our circumstances. If we are discerning and open God will call us through our crisis and lead us. Every day can write a new chapter of faith.

Yet it all hinges on connecting the God witnessed yesterday with the life we live today. Did you hear the people standing before Joshua? "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord...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; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord."

What's happening is the people are betting their future on God's track record.

But there are some important implications. First, there are no guarantees. God's track record is not proof positive that God will repeat what I want God to repeat in particular trials I face. We can't pin God or life down.

I'll never forget sitting with a wonderful counselor Carol and I asked to help us in our pre-marital counseling before our wedding day. We had a couple of good sessions together. I was feeling confident about the future. Then he said, "I have to tell you, 'there are no guarantees.' As I thought about it I realized he was right there are no guarantees. Much as we would like guarantees, for marriage or parenting or being the church – life does not fit into some formula for success and happiness.

Secondly, to meet the demands of each day faith has to be flexible. I remember a time in my life when my faith was very static. There was little if any room for ambiguity or questions without simple answers. What I learned is there is nothing I can cling to that will prevent or take away the uncertainty of life. A teacher of mine put it this way, he said Protestants rearrange the theological furniture of the faith. Faith is flexible.

When Lincoln stood on the platform at Gettysburg in 1863 the nation had never been at war with itself before. He had to reach deep into his imagination and heart to see where the founders' vision spoke to the present moment.

Westminster has never been at a financial crossroads like we are today – fiscal responsibility for all of the mission of this congregation; not relying on endowed funds or a few large givers. Will we be a congregation that gives at the level of "fees for services" or will we be a congregation that gives sacrificially from our deepest spiritual convictions? We will have to reach deep into our imagination and hearts to find where the faith passed on to us connects with our world and frees us to give in abundance, frees us to give beyond the limits that have held us back in the past.

Finally, faith is propositional. God speaks to every generation. The God who spoke to Joshua thousands of years ago is the same God who speaks to us today.

But at some point, the God who spoke to Joshua or John Calvin or Martin Luther King, Jr. or my sixth grade Sunday School teacher has to speak to me. I can't live in the shoes of Joshua or Calvin or King or Mrs. Cappell forever. You and I have to live in our own shoes.

The way to fit the shoes of our own faith is to respond to God's propositions by testing them. Trying them out. If the Bible makes a promise or proposition, that's my signal for a new way of living. It's time to test drive that proposition and see what happens.

We've been talking about rediscovering God by counting on God's track record for the crises we face today. When we do we reconstitute our faith.

The ways we discover God at work in our lives today will be the track record our children will use to trust God in the crises they face tomorrow.

There's a lot riding on the present defining moment in our families, for our church and in our nation. Amen.