



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH - DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

26 Pentecost - Proper 27 - Year A - November 8/9, 2008

Joshua 24:1 - 3a,14 - 25; Ps. 78:1 -7; [Amos 5:18 - 24]; Matthew 25:1-13

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Whom will you serve?

No matter what one's political views or party, no one can deny that it has been a monumentally historic week in the United States of America. Thomas Friedman offered a provocative insight concerning the magnitude of this election in his *New York Times* column this past Wednesday.¹ Friedman wrote:

“And so it came to pass that on Nov. 4, 2008, shortly after 11 p.m. Eastern time, the American Civil War ended, as a black man — Barack Hussein Obama — won enough electoral votes to become president of the United States. A civil war that, in many ways, began at Bull Run, Virginia, on July 21, 1861, ended 147 years later via a ballot box in the very same state. For nothing more symbolically illustrated the final chapter of America's Civil War than the fact that the Commonwealth of Virginia — the state that once exalted slavery and whose secession from the Union in 1861 gave the Confederacy both strategic weight and its commanding general — voted Democratic, thus assuring that Barack Obama would become the 44th president of the United States. This moment was necessary, for despite a century of civil rights legislation, judicial interventions and social activism — despite *Brown v. Board of Education*, Martin Luther King's I-have-a-dream crusade and the 1964 Civil Rights Act — the Civil War could never truly be said to have ended until America's white majority actually elected an African-American as president. That is what happened Tuesday night and that is why we awake this morning to a different country. The struggle for equal rights is far from over, but we start afresh now from a whole new baseline. Let every child and every citizen and every new immigrant know that from this day forward everything really is possible in America.”

“Let every child and every citizen and every new immigrant know that from this day forward everything really is possible in America....” It is this signal message of Tuesday's election that all American's should be able to affirm and celebrate, no matter one's political leanings, no matter one's feelings on any given issue: “From this day forward, everything is possible in America” for all of its citizens.

But what will we do now with this hope? What will we do now as Americans? This historic election is over....It is now a fact of history.....It has confirmed hope and reinforced the ideals and core values of our nation: that all people are created equal, that all are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights - life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But what now? What now that we have, as Thomas Friedman stated so succinctly, “awakened to a new country?”

Joshua gathered all the tribes at Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God (Josh 24:1).

It is a monumental moment in the history of ancient Israel....It is a time of transition...In the book of Joshua, which comes immediately after the book of Deuteronomy, we hear the story of Joshua and what is generally labeled Israel's "conquest" of Canaan, the "Promised Land." Israel has been led in a campaign by Joshua, who had inherited the mantle of leadership from Moses, the great prophet; the one who had led them out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt (See Exodus 12 - 15).

Moses was prohibited by God from leading the people into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34:1 - 5). He had offended God, and so God allowed him to see the land from a distance, but not to enter it. Moses is dead by the time Joshua led them in. Joshua led the conquest.

During the conquest there had been little time for the tribes of Israel to stop and gather themselves and to think and pray. As the story is told, they went from battle to battle, taking the land and settling their own tribes where the Canaanites had once been.

We pick up the story late in the game. The conquest is over. Joshua has led them to victory and now Joshua gathers them together....It is a time of transition. It is a time to shift from being a group of tribes on the move, engaged in warfare, engaged in conquering the land, to being a people who settle the land and who begin to establish themselves as a people. Above all, in this time of transition, it is a time for them to reclaim their identity as a people, to remember their core values as a nation, who they are, and what they are to be about...

Joshua understands this. *Joshua gathered all the tribes at Shechem, [which had become something of their capital]. Joshua, summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God (Joshua 24:1).*

And Joshua spoke to them, "Thus says the Lord: long ago your ancestors — Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor — lived beyond the River Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many" (Joshua 24:2 - 3). Joshua is reminding them who they are: God's people; people of the promise. He is challenging them to remember this, to own it and to live into it.

"Now therefore revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the foreign gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14).

Joshua wants to be sure that there is nothing superficial or cavalier about this, so he makes sure they are listening to him. He makes them aware of the gravity of the decision that is in front of them. "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord," he says to all those gathered, "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..." (Joshua 24:15)

It is a very confrontational speech.... In this monumental time of transition for the Israelites, an occasion when they have come to a completely new place in their history; a place of new beginnings and hope; a place of opportunity and vast possibilities. Joshua

confronted them and said to them, “Decide...Who are you? What are you about? Where is your true loyalty? Where are your essential values? Who is your god?”

From the very fact of Joshua’s felt need to gather the people, to speak to them, to remind them of their core story, to challenge and confront them with his provocative, pointed speech, from all of this we can tell that they were not united as a people....

They were divided and fractured and fighting with one another....It was not a stable time for Israel. They were surrounded by their enemies....There were all kinds of infighting among the various tribes and Joshua knew that they were very vulnerable....They were vulnerable both to forces within and forces without...They could never survive, never mind thrive, as a people unless they re-centered themselves in their core identity and values....

“Remember who you are and where you came from,” Joshua said to them.... “Remember who and what brought you this far along the way.” “Choose,” he said to them. “Choose this day whom you will serve.”

And then, just so that there was no chance of their misunderstanding him; no chance of mistaking where he stood and where his loyalties lay; Joshua boldly declares, without equivocation, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

The people respond in kind, but Joshua pushes them. “Be sure,” he says to them, “for God will not be patient with divided loyalties.”

“We will serve the Lord!” the people say to Joshua (Joshua 24:21). He responds to them, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to the Lord, to serve him” (Joshua 24:22). And the people said, “We are witnesses, the Lord our God we will serve, and him we will we obey” (Joshua 24:24).

Well, the people Israel made the promise, but did not do very well at keeping it. And the scriptural witness more than suggests that their future was compromised by their disobedience and lack of commitment to God and God’s ways. “Choose this day, whom or what you will serve.” It is a question that rings down through the centuries challenging every person of every age. So, whom do we serve?

Late last Spring I happened to discover a book called *Integrity*.² It was written by Egil “Bud” Krogh. Bud Krogh was the head of the Special Investigation Unit during the Nixon Administration. The Special Investigation Unit became known as the “Plumbers” because it was their job to fix “leaks.” Krogh was behind the illegal break-in at the office of Lewis Fielding, the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, who had “leaked” the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times.

As many of you remember, the Pentagon Papers were top secret papers that included an assessment indicating the Pentagon did not think the Vietnam war could be won and also revealed that the government was misleading the nation about the war and its casualties. The break-in of Fielding’s office was one of the early chapters in what would become The Watergate Scandal that brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon.

In his book, *Integrity*, a really compelling book, Krogh explores the question of using the power of the White House to commit illegal acts in the name of national security. He analyzes his own growing awareness of how he had compromised his own values and integrity. Krogh started out as good guy. He went to Washington with the best of intentions and the highest ideals, but things changed. Krogh writes:

“In the late afternoon of November 23, 1973, I stood on the lawn of the House of Burgesses, the former legislature in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. At the invitation of the president of the College of William and Mary and his wife, I had brought my family to Williamsburg as a respite from the Watergate storms that had deluged Washington, D.C. This was a difficult time. My despair over the course of my legal defense was causing me sharp pangs of conscience. On May 2, 1973, not even four months into the job, I had resigned my position as Undersecretary of Transportation, a casualty of the exploding Watergate investigation. [Krogh had asked to be released from the Special Investigations Unit and was made Undersecretary of Transportation.] When I approved the covert operation in Dr. Lewis Fielding’s office in 1971, national security was my main concern; I had been able to convince myself that it was the right thing to do under the circumstances. Later, in 1972, I relied on national security to justify lying to a U.S. District Attorney during the Watergate Investigation about my knowledge of the Plumbers activities. As I prepared my defense, again, national security was my justification. But as I worked through the issues, I felt uncomfortable with the soundness of the defense. The more I tried to align my thought with the higher sense of right, the more problematic it became. Looking around me, I recognized that my family and I were benefitting from rights that emanated from the founding ideals of America. Despite being under indictment in both federal and state courts and publically identified with serious crimes, I enjoyed the freedom to travel wherever I wanted, to speak with whomever I wished, to pray freely in any church and to talk to the press. Benefitting from all these rights, I had nonetheless violated another man’s civil rights in order to protect the country. This seemed hypocritical regardless of my defense. I came to accept that I could no longer defend my conduct. If I defended myself further, if I continued to justify violating rights I continued to enjoy, I would not only be a hypocrite but a traitor to the fundamental American idea of the right of an individual to be free from unwarranted government intrusion into his life. It was then and there, in Colonial Williamsburg, surrounded by family and a sense of the history of America, that I decided to plead guilty.”³

Krogh pled guilty to the crime of violating the civil rights of another American. He did not plea bargain or negotiate, but accepted the punishment determined by the court. He was sentenced to 2 to 6 years in prison and served four and half months.

What Krogh came to realize was that his obligation was not to serve the President of the United States, or the Nixon Administration. It wasn’t to serve Chief of Staff John Erlichman or the Republican Party. His obligation was to serve the Constitution of the United States.

“Choose this day whom you will serve,” Joshua asked the Israelites gathered at Shechem. “Choose this day whom you will serve,” we are asked all the time. Choices, important choices, are demanded of us everyday.

As Americans, our allegiance is not to the platform of the Republican Party or the Democratic Party; it is not to John McCain or Barack Obama; it is to the highest values and ideals of this country; to its core principles embedded in the Constitution, the

Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence. To the degree our leaders lead us in fulfilling these values, we owe them our allegiance and support. Our allegiance is to the social contract we are all a part of by virtue of our being Americans. We all need each other, each and every one of us. We are to be committed to the welfare of all of our citizens.

Moreover, as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, the burden of this concern for others is even greater. The values of Christ and his church are to be our highest priority and our first allegiance. When in the Pledge of Allegiance we say “One Nation under God” we are to mean what we say!

As Christians, it is our blessing and our responsibility to uphold, live out and encourage Christian values - the values of justice, righteousness, love, peace and the virtues of faith, hope and charity.

It is, above all, our sacred trust and responsibility to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and to love our neighbor as our self, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, to respect the dignity of every human being. For us, there are no demands, no allegiances, no laws, values greater than these.

“Choose this day, whom you will serve,” Joshua challenged the assembled people at Shechem. Tuesday brought forth a monumental moment in American history...It is a time of transition for this country. It is indeed a time of change. It is a time fraught with perils and dangers. But it is also a time of wonderful opportunity and hope...

And on this day, in this monumental time, words of Scripture ring out and challenge us. “Choose this day whom you serve.”

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

1. Friedman, Thomas “Finishing our work” which appeared as an Op-Ed column on Wednesday, November 5, 2008. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/opinion/05friedman.html>

2. Krogh, Egil “Bud” with Krogh, Matthew *Integrity: Good People, Bad Choices and Life Lessons from the White House* (New York: Public Affairs Books - Perseus Book Group, 2007)

3. Krogh p. 129 - 130.