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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH

AUGUST 26, 2007

ELKHORN, NEBRASKA

PASTOR WENDA FRY

1 PASTOR FRY: It has been a hot summer. It was hot
2 in most of the country.

3 I was in Louisville, Kentucky, last week for part of
4 my training that I'm doing this year and on Thursday it was
5 like 106 and then it had rained that night, so it felt like
6 exactly like Nebraska, it was all steamy, so it didn't feel
7 any different.

8 But it has been hot all over the country and it's
9 kind of nice this morning, and the last week we have had a
10 few days where the temperature is a little bit cooler and we
11 have caught a glimpse of fall and it feels really good.

12 Of course, the sunflowers are up in the fields and
13 that always used to signify to me and our kids that school is
14 going to start pretty school.

15 Of course it did start this last week, and with the
16 fall and with the changing of the seasons, of course, there
17 is a transition to make.

18 That transition involves a lot of decision making, a
19 lot of choosing, and a lot of choices, because many parents
20 who brought their kids back to school, and those students
21 themselves have to choose classes if they are in high school,
22 they have to choose what they are going to have for lunch.

23 And, parents, you have to choose what activities
24 you're going to be involved in with your kids, or apart from
25 your kids, and it's a time of transition, isn't it, to try to

1 figure out what you are going to do and how your schedules
2 are going to change accordingly.

3 So I thought today I would speak on, I chose a text
4 about choosing today, but an article caught my attention last
5 week in the Sunday World Herald.

6 It was called the "Simple Life of Nebraska" and the
7 full title is "The Simple Life of Nebraska Resonates More
8 When You've Left".

9 It's an article written by a guy who now lives in
10 New York City who is a native Nebraskan and in short he
11 misses his home state and really appreciates it more now that
12 he has left it.

13 I'm going to read a part of this here. He's talking
14 about how great the sky is, and of course it is, and he says
15 he is done officially complaining about traffic in Omaha, but
16 clearly he hasn't lived in Elkhorn this summer, right?

17 But, anyway, aside from that he asks, "Do you own a
18 car? Have you ever thought about how easy it is to get to
19 your vehicle because it is as close as your garage, driveway,
20 or the parking lot outside your apartment.

21 "How about the fact that in no more than 20 to 25
22 minutes we can drive virtually anyplace in the city.

23 "In New York City, if you own a car, you likely have
24 to walk blocks to reach it, and if you don't own a car you
25 have to walk, hail a cab or take the subway.

1 "Admittedly, many New Yorkers love these options,
2 and they love New York City life in general. For now I just
3 can't count myself among them.

4 "I'm not writing to knock New York living as much as
5 I want to remind my fellow Nebraskans that life in the
6 Cornhusker state is wonderful," and it is.

7 It's a great place. Every time I get off the plane,
8 the air, when I come out, the air is sweet. It might be
9 warm, but it's always a certain smell.

10 It is a wonderful place to live and we do have the
11 freedom to come and go as we please and to hop in our cars
12 and go wherever we want whenever we want.

13 But I think that kind of freedom makes it hard to
14 say no to things, and I think that we find ourselves, with
15 that kind of freedom, I think we find ourselves making more
16 and more commitments and letting less and less go, and that's
17 a hard thing, making those kinds of choices.

18 Today we are going to look at a text that is about
19 choosing.

20 It's true, we have a lot of freedom in these great
21 United States.

22 But I also think that sometimes it leads to the
23 state of confusion when it comes to making choices of what we
24 ought to let go of, or what we ought to do for sure.

25 So we are going to look at Joshua, Chapter 24, and

1 we are going to read a part of that.

2 In the pew Bible it's on page 218. If you brought
3 own Bible, we really encourage that, because then you can
4 write in it and highlight things and underline verses that
5 make sense to you, so we really encourage that.

6 But Joshua Chapter 24, I am going to read the first
7 three verses and then I'm going to jump over to Verse 14.

8 "Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to
9 Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and
10 the officers of Israel, and they presented themselves before
11 God.

12 "And Joshua said to all the people, thus says the
13 Lord, the God of Israel. Long ago your ancestors Terah and
14 his sons Abraham and Nahor lived beyond the Euphrates and
15 served other Gods.

16 "Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the
17 river and led him through all the land of Canan and made his
18 offspring many."

19 He continues there on sort of a historical synopsis,
20 and we are going to look at that in a few minutes.

21 But for right now let's jump over to Verse 14.
22 Joshua is giving a speech to the people, and this is kind of
23 the pith of his speech.

24 "Now therefore revere the Lord and serve him in
25 sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your

1 ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the
2 Lord.

3 "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose
4 this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors
5 served in the region beyond the river or the gods of the
6 Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my
7 household, we will serve the Lord."

8 We are going to look at the rest of this now in just
9 a little bit more detail, but that's the pith of this story
10 today, is the choice.

11 We are in a transition time. We are in a change of
12 seasons. We are facing a lot of choices and Joshua speaks to
13 that today.

14 So Joshua is a quite a leader, and we are going to
15 recall for a few moments that he was the one chosen by God to
16 fill Moses' sandals, and they are pretty big sandals to fill.

17 We learn in the book of Joshua, if you read from
18 chapter one to the end, we learn that Joshua was willing to
19 follow orders as well as give them.

20 And beginning in Chapters 1 and 2 God says I'm
21 choosing you to lead the people, Moses is going to die, but
22 I'm going to take you and the people across the Jordan River
23 into the promised land, the land that was promised to Moses
24 and God's people.

25 And so he chooses Joshua to do that, and in the

1 first chapter he says be strong and courageous.

2 Be strong and courageous. Be strong and very
3 courageous.

4 Joshua was and throughout the whole book of Joshua
5 he does incredible things as a leader.

6 He really proves that he is a good leader for God's
7 people.

8 And by the time we get to the end of the book here
9 in Joshua 24 we see that the people of God had done a pretty
10 good job of creating a new life in the promised land.

11 They kind of remind me a little bit of our people
12 that settled this great United States, the people that came
13 over from Europe and settled here.

14 They had to be strong and very courageous, and that
15 reminds me of that story, because they had done a pretty good
16 job of creating a life in the country that had been promised
17 to them.

18 And from all outward appearances it would seem that
19 the people of Israel are obedient and fairly content.

20 I mean, it just looks that way. If you read from
21 Chapter 1 to Chapter 24, you think this is a good people,
22 they are obedient, they're fairly content.

23 But Joshua knows how inconsistent the people can be
24 in their faith.

25 And he knows that sometimes they are just stubborn,

1 they just won't move in trusting in the Lord God.

2 Let's read a little bit more of the text. That's
3 really what Joshua is concerned about. We will start at
4 Chapter 24, Verse 1.

5 "Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to
6 Shechem."

7 Let's stop there and understand that that's really
8 an important piece of this story.

9 Flip back to Genesis 35, Verses 1 through 4, and we
10 learn of the importance of Shechem.

11 "God said to Jacob, arise, go up to Bethel and
12 settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to
13 you when you fled from your brother Esau.

14 "So Jacob said to his household and to all who were
15 with him, put away the foreign gods that are among you and
16 purify yourselves, and change your clothes. Then come, let
17 us go to Bethel, that I make an altar there to the God who
18 answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me
19 wherever I have gone."

20 So we see that Shechem was a place where Jacob said
21 to God's people, put away those things that keep your
22 attention so much, put away those things called.

23 He called them foreign gods. What he means here,
24 and what Joshua means in saying put away the foreign Gods in
25 this text as well today, it's the same thing as what Jacob is

1 saying.

2 Put away those things that keep you from serving God
3 single-mindedly.

4 And so they are at Shechem. It's important. It
5 apparently seems to be a recurring theme with God and God's
6 people, they obey for a while and then they start worshipping
7 foreign things, like garage door openers, and trinkets, and
8 jewels, and shades of lipstick.

9 Put away those things that keep you, that are so, as
10 Pastor Mark said in our confession, that become baggage after
11 a time. Things you just drag around.

12 I love that picture of some of my baggage being
13 thrown into the sea of his forgiveness.

14 I've got boxes at home that I have not gone through
15 in years.

16 Put away those things that are holding you back from
17 worshipping God single-mindedly.

18 And so he gathers the people at Shechem, because
19 that's important. That's where Jacob had said the same
20 thing.

21 And look who he summons. The elders, the heads, the
22 judges, and the officers of Israel.

23 It doesn't just say and he summoned the people. It
24 says the judges, the officers, the heads of Israel.

25 In other words, the elite of the leadership. People

1 who have said I want to follow God.

2 The most faithful. That's who he summoned. He
3 summoned the elite of the leadership.

4 I find that amazing. You would think he would
5 summon the rest of the people.

6 You would think that the leaders would have already
7 gotten it, that we need to serve God single-mindedly, but
8 that's who he summoned.

9 In Verse 2 Joshua said to the people, thus says the
10 Lord God of Israel, he's old, and he's weary, and he's done a
11 pretty good job of leading the people into the promised land.

12 And he's about ready to die, and we know that
13 because right across the page, Chapter 23, Verse 14, "And now
14 I am about to go the way of all the earth."

15 So that is how we know that he's getting ready to
16 die, but even in his old age he knows that this isn't his
17 idea.

18 Even in his old age he holds to the fact that God
19 has chosen him as a leader, and then he speaks on God's
20 behalf, thus says the Lord.

21 In other words, it's not my idea; it's God's. So
22 thus says the Lord.

23 And then in Verses 2 through 13 he gives that
24 historical synopsis, and just peruse that with me.

25 He started by telling about Abraham, and then he

1 went down to talk in Verse 5 about Moses and Aaron and the
2 plagues in Egypt and that God brought them out.

3 And then there is the Red Sea story in Verse 6.

4 And then in Verse 8 there is that battle with the
5 Amorites who lived on the other side of the Jordan, they
6 fought with you but I handed them over to you. In other
7 words, you were victorious with my help.

8 And then in 9 he recalls that great story about
9 Balaam and King Balak, the one about the donkey, such a great
10 story there.

11 And then Jericho is right there when he went over
12 the Jordan.

13 You see what he's doing here, disciples, he's
14 recalling everything that God has done for them, recounting
15 the mighty works of God amongst them.

16 And I absolutely love Verse 13, "I gave you a land
17 on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not
18 built, and you live in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards
19 and oliveyards that you did not plant."

20 Such a good reminder of how great God is; that
21 everything we have comes from him.

22 And I challenge you, have you done a historical
23 synopsis of your life with God?

24 I challenge you. Sit down and write down your own
25 historical synopsis of how God has been present in your life.

1 And I would probably start with my baptism when I
2 was a baby out in Seattle, Washington, and my parents took me
3 to Trinity Lutheran church to have me baptized like a couple
4 weeks after my birth.

5 So I would probably start with that. You were
6 there. You heard my borning cry.

7 I might going through when I was protected when
8 walking to school.

9 But I challenge you, how about writing your own
10 historical synopsis of what God has done for you in your
11 life.

12 It's such a good exercise, because it reminds us of
13 how great God is, and that's what he's doing here.

14 Of course, that's what we do every time we gather
15 and worship, too, isn't it?

16 We remember how great God is. It's a good thing to
17 do. We need to practice doing that.

18 But it's amazing to me, because it's almost as if
19 they had not remembered how good God was.

20 So in Verse 14 I'm a bit puzzled, because Joshua
21 says to the people, to the leadership, "Now therefore revere
22 the Lord and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness, put
23 away the gods your ancestors served beyond the river and in
24 Egypt and serve the Lord."

25 It's almost like they had done that yet. Then he

1 says his famous lines.

2 "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose
3 this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors
4 served in the region beyond the river or the gods of the
5 Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my
6 household, we will serve the Lord."

7 He's old. He's weary. He has had a lot to do and
8 he's done a good job and even to the very end he is a leader
9 and he claims, as for me and my household, he's about ready
10 to die and he's still saying we're going to serve the Lord
11 single-mindedly.

12 It's an awesome example for those who are leaders.
13 As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

14 Verse 16, "Then the people answered, far be it from
15 us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for
16 it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up
17 from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who
18 did those great signs in our sight.

19 "He protected us all along the way that we went, and
20 among all the peoples through whom we passed, and the Lord
21 drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived
22 in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he
23 is our God."

24 It sounds good, doesn't it? I mean, what is wrong
25 with that?

1 It sounds like the Israelites are remembering the
2 times that God helped them. It sounds believable. It sounds
3 good to me.

4 But Joshua is not impressed. He hears something in
5 this. He knows the people so well.

6 He hears something in there that is not quite right
7 with him.

8 And he hears that they are thinking to themselves,
9 well, of course we'll serve God. We have got so many
10 blessings.

11 We'll show up. We can make church maybe two times a
12 month this year.

13 In fact, family, let's do better coming to church in
14 the fall than we did in the summer.

15 Family, let's at least try to get to church all
16 together maybe twice a month.

17 Because we have so many blessings, let's go and
18 thank God for them.

19 But that's not what this is about and Joshua sees
20 it.

21 He sees that they are thinking that this
22 relationship with God is a tit-for-tat relationship, like he
23 is a sugar daddy in the sky that has given them so many
24 blessings and of course they are ought to thank him.

25 So, yeah, we will go to church once in a while and

1 do that.

2 But what he's pointing out, he sees right through
3 it, and he says no, it's not about thanking God, it's not
4 about being full bellied, it's not about being grateful; it's
5 about a lifestyle.

6 What he sees is amazing to me. I had not seen it
7 when I read this story. I had not seen it, that he sees
8 right through their words and says you're just paying lip
9 service.

10 You're just saying that. It sounds good. You're
11 just saying that you're going to serve God.

12 But what you mean is you are just going to add it
13 onto the rest of the stuff you do and you might keep it
14 separate.

15 What Joshua wants is you serve God single-mindedly.
16 If you say yes to God, what Joshua knows, if you say yes to
17 God, you say no to other gods, accumulation of garage door
18 openers, lipstick shades, black shoes, and the list goes on
19 and on. You know what I'm saying.

20 I want your life. I want your whole life. That's
21 what Joshua is saying to the people. I want everything.

22 I want your marriage. I want your work. I want
23 your heart. I want your clothes closet.

24 I want everything. You say no to everything else
25 but God.

1 We can see that he's not happy because in Verse 19,
2 I couldn't believe it, I had never seen this part before,
3 "But Joshua said to the people, you cannot serve the Lord,
4 for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God."

5 Here it is. He wants everything. All of us. So
6 don't say, Joshua says to his people, don't say that you want
7 to do that, because this guy you're dealing with is a mighty
8 God.

9 To serve him means that you say no to other Gods,
10 and they hear him, because that's a hard word, "If you
11 forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn
12 and do you harm."

13 Ouch. That's a hard word to hear, but they hear it,
14 because they shout at him in Verse 21, "No. We will serve
15 the Lord."

16 And Joshua still doesn't buy it. He still says no,
17 you're not getting it, are you?

18 Verse 22, "You are witnesses against yourselves that
19 you have chosen the Lord, to serve him."

20 In other words, okay, you are hearing one another,
21 you hold each other accountable.

22 You're hearing it. Will you hold each other
23 accountable to it, is what he's saying. You're witnesses.

24 They finally get it and they say in 22, we are
25 witnesses, we will do that.

1 And then he says, okay, put them away then, put away
2 all those things, those depressive thoughts, put aside
3 over-drinking, and the over-eating, and the over-shopping,
4 put those things aside.

5 Because when you say yes to the jealous and holy
6 God, it means that you say no to those things.

7 Choose this day whom you will serve. Your heart is
8 what God wants.

9 He's a jealous God. He does not like lip service.
10 If you make a vow, pay it.

11 Do what you say you want to do to follow after him.
12 Jesus was pressing his disciples, his would-be disciples on
13 this all the time.

14 He would say follow me, and Peter and Andrew, they
15 left their nets right away, but I'm pretty sure they look a
16 look at Zebedee sitting there in the boat.

17 We don't know how long it took them to leave their
18 nets, their old way of life and go.

19 We don't know, it doesn't say, but they do go,
20 finally.

21 Boy, were they in for the ride of their life,
22 because it is intriguing, hey, you guys are good at fishing
23 for fish, come with me and you'll fish for people.

24 What could he possibly mean, fish for people?
25 That's going to be a big net, kind of fun, adventure, kind of

1 fun, don't really know where they are going, or how they are
2 going to end up, but they follow him.

3 To another guy he said follow me. He says yes, but
4 my mom is dying, so can you wait until she's done dying and I
5 finish all this business?

6 Jesus says no, let the dead bury the dead, come with
7 me. It's an immediate response.

8 The rich young ruler comes up to Jesus and asks what
9 must I do to inherit eternal life?

10 Go sell all you have and then come and follow me,
11 and this rich person walked away sad, because he had
12 accumulated a lot of garage door openers. He went away sad.

13 But Jesus pressed would-be disciples all the time.
14 He didn't say here are a bunch of ways, choose one of them.

15 He said I am the way, I am the truth, and I am the
16 life.

17 I'm the pattern for your life. Do what I do and do
18 with other people what I did with my disciples.

19 Eat together. Do life together. Love each other
20 and eat at the table together.

21 Worship me and serve, do mission together. It's
22 three dimensional.

23 Worship me, eat with other people and love them, and
24 serve in the world.

25 It's three dimensional; it's not fifteen

1 dimensional.

2 And if Jesus did it, then we can do it. Pattern
3 your life after me.

4 I'm the way, I'm the truth, I am the life, and when
5 you say yes to Jesus, what it means, it's the same as in
6 Joshua's time, that you say no to other things.

7 Disciples, you can do this. You can sort this out.
8 I know you're entering a new season now where you have to
9 make a lot of choices, and there are soccer games, and
10 volleyball and basketball and singing and dance and Rotary
11 Club and Kiwanis and speeches to be made here and traveling
12 to do there.

13 And I know, this is the hardest place, we may live
14 in the great State of Nebraska, it's true, it's wonderful.

15 Like this picture of the sun burning the mist off
16 the cornfield, the Son, S-O-N, can burn away some of these
17 indecisions, some of this fog around your life that keeps you
18 from serving God single-mindedly.

19 We do live in a wonderful place, but I'm wondering
20 if maybe one of the gods we need to put away is the fact that
21 we do jump in our cars and go anywhere whenever we want to.

22 Maybe that's one of the gods he wants us to put
23 away, and this is the hardest place, I believe, in a suburb
24 like this, to follow Jesus, because we think we really don't
25 need him. We have so much.

1 Today God says to you and to me, put away other
2 Gods.

3 Choose this day whom you will serve, because saying
4 yes to God means saying no to so many other things.

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