

A CHOICE TO BE MADE¹
Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
November 13, 2011

This week as I was making a pastoral visit in one of our hospitals, I stepped onto the elevator, and found two people there, a man and a woman. When the elevator began moving, the woman said to me, “Hello, Doctor. You look like a doctor. Are you a doctor?” Before I could say anything else, she continued, “If you aren’t a doctor, you’re an undertaker. You are either a doctor or an undertaker. Which is it?”

By that time, the door opened and they got off the elevator. She turned to me and said, “Which is it?” I said, “I’m a minister making a pastoral call.” And as the door was closing she said back to me, “Good—I may need you sometime!”

I

As I left the hospital that day, I thought her question might well be put to us all as we face our church’s economic challenge: are we a doctor or an undertaker? A doctor’s challenge is to diagnose and prescribe. An undertaker’s task is to provide a dignified and honorable burial. Both professions are worthy and important, but the first aims at restoring health

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and lengthening life, while the latter aims at providing dignity and closure at the end of life. Which are we?

I have no doubt, no hesitation, in saying that our congregation is the doctor. Our lay leadership has diagnosed the problem. The problem is simple: we are spending more than we can afford, and we have been doing it for a long time. The time is up. The financial recession has come home to First Baptist Church. That is the diagnosis.

The prescription for financial health is also simple: We must live within our means. We will not sacrifice our core ministries or deviate from our mission. But we must find a way to gain \$200,000 by a combination of cutting spending and increasing revenue over the next few years. The Governing Board and the Board of Finance have worked hard at both, and we are well on our way. Now it is our turn to consider our annual pledge.

This comes at a time when our personal budgets are also under great stress—some more than others. It is not an easy time for any of us. Part of the reduction in budget involves a reduction in staff salaries. I have told the Governing Board that I understand the need to cut salaries, including a significant cut in my salary, and I also announced to them, as I am announcing to you, that Donna and I will increase our pledge to the church for 2012. Now is not the time to be shy or coy about our need to pledge sacrificially. Now is

the time to step up and truly demonstrate how much we care about the ministries this church provides.

I am well aware that there are some among us who have lost a job. Some among us have had their income cut severely. Some among us are facing the loss of a home. Some retirees have had their pensions reduced. But what I am discovering is a commitment so deep that even those with greatly reduced income will make a pledge, even if it is \$50 or \$100 for the year. Even a token pledge says, "I am a member of this church and therefore I support its ministries. I am a part of something larger, and I will do my part even if it is not as much as I have pledged in the past." Then the rest of us must shoulder more of the load because we are a community of caring, and when one person is hurting, we are there for them.

We need to thank the church boards for taking leadership on this challenge. They have worked hard to be fair and honest with the cuts in the budget. In addition, they have accepted my challenge to them that they increase their pledges to the ministry of the church. This is what I call positive, first-tier leadership. Second-tier leadership would be to simply sit around a table and figure out where to cut. First-tier leadership is to step up and truly lead by increasing their pledges. They have responded to that challenge of first-tier leadership, and I thank them publicly.

They have truly been good doctors: they have correctly diagnosed the problem, and they are taking the lead in setting an example for restoring financial health to this body of believers.

II

The scripture we read today is a story about Joshua. For longer than I can remember this text has been used for stewardship sermons: *Choose you this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house-hold, we will serve the Lord.* The truth is, I do not like the way that text is frequently employed by well-meaning preachers. They use it in an either/or manner, as if by your support of the church you are either all for God or all against God. I don't see it as that stark a choice.

Not even Joshua himself could claim to have made such an all or nothing choice. When he preached that sermon, he was an old man looking back on a life that was surely less than perfect. He was, after all, primarily a warrior. The story begins by saying that Joshua gathered all the people together at Shechem. The leaders, the officials, the military brass, and all the people came to *present themselves before God*, the story says. Then the Bible says, *And Joshua said to all the people....* What follows is his sermon to them, and it is important. But I have to wonder what the people thought about between the gathering and his sermon.

These were, after all, people he had known all his life. There were the older people who remembered when Moses died and Joshua assumed command. There were soldiers who had fought with him, parents who had lost a child in the battles, and young people who were filled with energy for the future. They all revered him for his leadership. He had become a legend in his own time.

Now, in his old age, after all the bloodshed and atrocities and sacrifices and mistakes and triumphs, he gets down to what is most important in life: *as for me and my house-hold*, he declares, *we will serve the Lord*. He knew that he would soon stand face to face with that Lord and have to account for his life, so he was getting his priorities straight.

Then he challenged them all not to wait until they were old like he was. Do it now, he was saying. Make the choice now—don't wait. The strange thing about this story is that the people all responded positively. They said, "OK—we will follow the Lord." But look what happened! Joshua did not accept their answer! He did not accept their original response. Instead he reminded them that their covenant with God was so serious that it would demand sacrifice from each one of them. They would have to do something tangible. In the ancient words of the story: *put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord....*

III

Now as the Senior Minister of this church, I am placed in the role of Joshua when I urge you to live out your covenant with God as members of this church. And I do so in a very tangible way. This is not just a nebulous, spiritual appeal; it is a practical and tangible appeal. Here is a tangible pledge card. It represents our covenant with God. We all have what Joshua called *foreign gods* that are among us. I ask you (as I ask myself) to recognize them and to put them away. I ask you to fill out that tangible pledge card with a tangible writing instrument. Place real numbers on that card that represent tangible cash that will support the ministries of this church. Then I ask you next Sunday (Thanksgiving Sunday!) to place that tangible pledge card in that familiar offering plate so that we can continue our ministries to real people in need in this community, in this state, and throughout the country and the world.

In doing so, I remind you that this congregation has faced challenges before. Our calling in this place and time is full financial health leading to a bright future! The only thing stopping us from doing that is a kind of paralysis that keeps us in the same place we have been.

A few years ago I was attending a conference in New York at the Riverside Church. While there I heard one of the great African American

preachers in America, a relatively young man named Otis Moss. He grew up in that wonderful black Baptist tradition in which preaching is a kind of conversation between the congregation and the preacher.

Otis Moss told a story from that tradition that applies to us today. He said that in his hometown of LaGrange, GA at the Mount Olive Baptist Church of his childhood, there was a young seminary student who was asked to preach his first sermon. As this young seminarian stood up to preach his well-prepared sermon, he had all his notes carefully arranged on the pulpit. But in those days, the church did not have air conditioning, and all the windows were open, and as he stood up to preach, a nice breeze blew all his notes off the pulpit.

This young man stood there not knowing what to say. But there was an elder saint who kept saying, "Go ahead! Preach it! That's right—say it!" Everybody in the church knew that he was repeating himself a lot and that what he said didn't make a lot of sense. So immediately after the service he sought out this elderly woman and said, "Now, you know that my notes went everywhere."

She answered, "Sure, I saw that." He said, "And you know that what I said didn't make a lot of sense?" She said, "That is absolutely true that you weren't making any sense at all!" So the young man said, "Then why were you

so encouraging? Why were you shouting the entire time as if I were preaching an incredible sermon?” And she smiled and said back to him, “Just because you didn’t do your job, doesn’t mean I’m not going to do mine!”²

IV

Dear friends, all of us have a job to do! When the wind of recession blows our income all over the place, when financial challenges make us wonder about the future, we cannot be paralyzed by fear! It is our calling and our duty to transform our paralysis into a confident future!

We are all going to do our job, and this week our job is to pledge with gratitude to support the ministries of this church because God is good; God’s promises have not been deleted from history; God has promised to walk with us and strengthen us and guide us. We have promised to be faithful just as God is faithful, and because of that, our future is as healthy and as bright as ever!

² Otis Moss, III, “We Have Nothing to Lose,” www.csec.org/csec/sernon/moss_5201.htm.