

Post Election Jitters
Selections from Joshua 24
Rev. Cameron Barr
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It's a familiar line from the book of Joshua - one of the few lines of scripture that almost everyone can recite. Maybe your grandmother has it printed and hanging somehow in her kitchen or her living room. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." It's a strong statement of self-understanding and self-commitment. Joshua asks for a similar commitment from the gathered people of Israel. Put away the gods your ancestors served, he says, and choose this day whom you will serve. The crowd replies reassuringly. Of course, Joshua, we are with you. "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods." Coming here in the final chapter, it sounds to me like those famous last words. The historical narrative soon turns to the book of Judges, in which Israel will contend with a multitude of flirtations with all sorts of new gods and political leaders. How can they really be so sure that they will not offend the Lord their God? Joshua accepts their affirmation. Ok, he says, "you will stand as witnesses against yourselves."

I don't think it usually serves the church well for the pastor to lead off with statements about their political preferences. I want church to be a place where all people feel included and it seems to me that we make simplistic assumptions about people based on what we know or think we know about their politics. But any honest reflection on this election for me has to acknowledge the mixed feelings I've had since sitting down to obsess over election returns on Thursday night. I was really hoping for a definitive and overwhelming rejection of the cruelty and inhumanity that has characterized our national leadership in the past four years. I wanted more than anything a landslide that said Trumpism is not who we are. Of course that's not what we got, either nationally or in races further down the ballot. I'm recording this message on Thursday morning, when we still don't know the results in Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Georgia.

But upon reflection today I have thought a lot about how unrealistic yesterday's hopes were. In the polarized age in which we live, landslides are very rare. We all know that elections in our country turn on a few votes in a few swing states. The most successful democratic politicians are those who caution us not to take any vote for granted. If we want progress, we've got to be organized and vigilant and we've got to ask for every vote. But there's another reason I think my hopes for a lopsided election yesterday were a little out of place. And that is that Trumpism is a little bit of who we are. The cruelty and inhumanity of the past four years is part of our national story. White supremacy and racism - I don't like it but, yes, it's part of our story. Nativism and anti-immigrant attitudes - they are so hurtful and cause so much pain to members of our own church, but it does none of us any good to deny those impulses are not in our national character. Religious extremism, sexism and gender violence, these things are not only as present in our country as they are in the Middle East - they are elevated and celebrated by elected leaders. If we think historically, we can certainly see these sins in every chapter of our national life. It's more painful to think about the present, to look at the electoral map and think - goodness - these evil forces aren't just historical narratives, they are present among us now.

But of course it shouldn't take a national election to wake me up to this. We know that there is so much need for healing in our country. We know that there are so many people suffering in our country - not just ill with the pandemic, but lost in economic gloom and worried about the future. We're terribly divided between those among us who are doing pretty well and have a great

deal of security and on the other hand those who have been left behind or think they're falling behind. In short, everyone who participates in an election is carrying the burdens of being human. The divisions among us are magnified by the fact that we only really talk to each other every four years. We gather ourselves into neighborhoods, schools, and churches full of people who look and think like us. And then we all read the same news and the same analysis and scroll through the same facebook feeds until we think we've educated ourselves pretty well. Really we're just staring vainly into a mirror. Pretty soon, we've given ourselves a pretty distorted portrait of the world. Daniel Kahneman describes the cognitive process that causes us to misunderstand the world around us. "What you see is all there is," he writes in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. We choose the information we want to receive. We are morbidly incurious about the world beyond what is in our immediate field of vision.

Standing there on the Jordan with Joshua, the Israelites aren't thinking about what they'll soon encounter - the multitude of Canaanite gods asking for their allegiance, the imperious judges who will rise and fall, the demands that a new king might make of them - and how all of this will draw them away from the God who delivered them from Egypt. Choose the gods that you are going to serve, Joshua says to his people, foreshadowing that faithfulness in this new country won't be easy. "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord and serve other gods," they say. Be careful, Joshua is saying. Are you really so sure that you're one of the faithful ones of Israel? That's the risk for me, I think, in the aftermath of this election, viewing myself a bit too self-righteously. I'm one of the good Americans, I'm tempted to think. When in fact, because I am an American every sinful part of the American story is part of my story too. The racism, the sexism, the Trumpism - gosh, I don't see that just on the electoral map. I see it in myself.

So the task of people who follow Jesus in this time, I think, is to do both of the things that Joshua points to here - to serve the Lord and only the Lord, and to do so with humility. To serve the Lord and only the Lord - that is, to wage the righteous battle with the forces of sin, evil and death. To join with Joshua in his self-confident statement of commitment is to be clear about our values and to work uncompromisingly for justice and righteousness. For me, to serve the Lord is to demand a competent public health response to this pandemic. To reject hateful speech and insist upon good character in our leaders. To keep the global peace and work for climate justice. For me, to serve the Lord and only the Lord is to extend hospitality to newcomers, to ease the path for immigrants, to welcome refugees. To address racism in our hearts and in our institutions. But it's a thin line between personal conviction and self-righteousness. And what good is it for me to be on the right side without love? To love is not to glorify in being right but to accept that all of us have been wrong. Love is not just getting to the right solution, but being with others in the problem. I truly hope that by the time you hear this message the election is over and that we are on our way to installing more humane and compassionate leadership. And I also hope the coming season brings out the best in us: conviction graced with humility, righteousness blessed with self-reflection, progress grounded in solidarity.

And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God.