

The Words of Life

In our Old Testament lesson we have the story of the Israelites who are finally standing in the midst of the promised land after the trials in Egypt, the wandering in the desert, and the battles to possess the land. They stood there in the promised land that was supposed to be flowing with milk and honey and it seemed somehow less spectacular than they had imagined. They had come so far, endured so much, and fought so hard, but the truth was it was still going to take a lot of hard work to cultivate the land, and there were still so many battles left to fight to make it truly theirs. They thought that it should be easier, looked back almost nostalgically on slavery in Egypt, and wondered maybe if they simply followed another god if it would be simpler. They were battle-worn and world-weary. They wanted a god who would promise them success without struggle.

Joshua recognized what was going on and decided to remind them of their story. He was worried there would be some backsliding because it is a natural tendency, so he allowed them to glimpse again the God of Israel. This was not a god they could carry around in their pocket like a magic talisman to ward off worry, or a good luck charm to make life better, but instead they are offered the God who is unwavering even when they waver and waffle, the God who brought them this far and still promised more, the God who is with them in birth, in death, in humiliation, in joy, in wandering, and in arrival. Following that God, Joshua says, is better than an easier path, because it is a truer path, and a more hopeful path, and they can do what they want, but he is choosing to follow that way.

I sympathize with the Israelites because I've had similar feelings on my religious journey. I grew up in a church that wasn't easy to be in and definitely left me with some scars. The church split twice before I went to college. They were ugly and divisive splits - but church fights are almost always like that. When I went off to college I wandered without a spiritual home for years, all while becoming a religious studies major and feeling like I was constantly in a battle over faith as I search for a better place to stand and believe. When I left college I found the Episcopal Church, which would eventually be my home, but it was a hard transition at first. I had thought this would be a place for me, but it took a lot of work to even get through a service - with the Christian aerobics of stand up, sit down, kneel, now back on your feet to sing a difficult seven verse hymn, now genuflect and cross yourself at the same time, and do it all while juggling two hymnals and a book of common prayer. I wasn't sure I was up for it. And to top it off, right as I was coming in to the church, there were the divisions over Gene Robinson's ordination as the first openly gay bishop, and I thought, 'I don't know if I can do this again. I'm tired and over the fighting.' I remember thinking, "this church thing, this religious life should be easier." I'm sure some of you have sat right here in the holy space of this church and thought something similar.

I'm not sure why I thought it should be easier. I was familiar with the Bible. No one ever says about Jesus, "Man I want to be just like him. That guy lived an easy life." If you think that you haven't read the book. I'm not sure easier was really what I was looking for anyway. I was looking for a land of promise, a place of purpose, a path where I knew God was with me, and I could be reminded of the words of life. I started working at that church and it wasn't easy, but we

all stayed together in spite of differences, worshipped together - praying to God and for one another constantly, and worked for a common vision to make the promise of the kingdom of God a little more tangible for all - and so I chose that I would follow God there. Others chose differently and I wished them well, but that was the place I found God to be with me - which was the promise I was looking for, and so I stayed and followed God there. I had found a place where the struggle was given meaning and it was worth it. It wasn't that it was less difficult but it was more hopeful. I think that is what is being promised here in today's readings.

In the gospel passage, Jesus has just gotten done with a very difficult teaching and most people just desert him outright. (On a side note, it gives me some level of comfort that Jesus once preached a sermon that was so bad that most of his followers left immediately afterwards, and yet his whole movement still turned out alright.) He just has the twelve left, and he asks if they're going to go too. Peter says, "where would we go; you have the words of life." Peter says so much in that concise little statement. He is basically saying, "Jesus, it's not like we haven't thought about it. We've looked around at our options. Following you isn't easy and we would like to have a better alternative. But the world is a hard and broken place, and everyone who goes through it faces trials and comes out damaged, and in the end they all die. But you somehow make the struggle worthwhile, you make our lives purposeful, and in the end you promise life. That's why we're still here. You have the words life."

I think that is what most of us are looking for. We know that struggle is simply part of life in this world, but we are looking for hope and meaning. Some give up along the way, and I think that is understandable. Sad, but understandable. That is what Joshua is trying to get people to preclude with a public declaration and having common bond of following God together.

Some will turn away because they hope for some easier path. For some, like the Israelites, some form of slavery - whether it be continuing in a broken relationship, a soul-crushing job, or some actual addiction - is not too high a price to pay for safety and the comfort of the familiar. The place of belonging, even if it is in bondage, may seem better than struggling and wandering about, unsettled, homeless, hungry, and unknown. But that won't lead to life. There is no promise at the end of that struggle. We sometimes paint pictures of our own Egypt in our minds with grand views of the pyramids without remembering that our vantage point in real life was always the worker carrying the heavy bricks.

And you could listen to all kinds of other gods. There are all sorts of people selling Christianity in all sorts of ways, promising a path to prosperity and quick fixes, and instant health. I get it. Sometimes I wish Jesus had said, "Come to me and you will be successful and have lots of friends." Or, "Follow me and I will give you more money than you could possibly count." I could market that message in my sleep. I could take that and evangelize people all day long. But it's not true. And we all know it.

The story of Jesus goes more like this: It was hard and people abandoned him. He didn't always have a lot - not a lot of money, or friends, or life's comforts. He suffered, was betrayed, and some days the darkness seemed like it would swallow him up and win. But the struggle was ultimately meaningful. The promise was redemption and restoration of all things. And in the end was life. That's the story we have. Those are the words of life. It's really the only story we have. But it is also the only story we need because it is the only story worth telling.

And so Jesus asks us to choose to live into that story. Choose to abide in him, he asks us. Because we live in unstable places, we are called to abide in the stability of Christ. Because the path will be hard, we are called to abide in his strength. And because this journey will be trying, we are told to feed on him, and in doing so we will live forever - not just exist, but really live.

There is a promised land. There is a kingdom of God. But it will not come easy. Faith is not that thing you have so that you can get rich and lead a successful and easy life. Faith is the thing you have so that you can hold true to the vision through the struggles. So choose this day whom you will follow. But I implore you to choose the way that leads to life. Amen