

The God Who Can Be Rejected: A Sermon

12th Sunday After Pentecost

Joshua 24: 1-2,14-25

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:60-69



We find something rather odd when we look at the passage from Joshua in this morning's lectionary readings. In this passage, Joshua has gathered all the tribes together at a place called Shechem, and Joshua is renewing the covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, when Moses had led Israel out of Egypt into the desert. At the beginning of the passage (much of which we did not read this morning), Joshua recounts the story of God's dealings with Israel's ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He tells of Moses and the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and he tells of how God has given Israel a new land to dwell in. Joshua then commands the people: "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:14)

Now here comes the strange part. Joshua gives the people a choice. "And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (v. 15) Israel is given a choice between serving the gods of the land in which they used to live or the gods of the new land in which they now live. Or

they can serve the Lord.

In ancient societies, gods tended to be attached to the land in which they were worshiped. So the gods worshiped in Egypt are the gods of Egypt. The gods of the Amorites are the gods of the new land in which Israel dwells. But the biblical God is not a God bound to a particular place or land. He gives Israel a land, but he is not a God associated with a land, but with a history. He is the God who made a covenant with Israel's ancestors, and who delivered Israel from slavery before they had a land. This is a God who makes covenants with his people, and a covenant involves a choice. One actually has to make a decision to worship such a God. And so, here is the odd part. Israel's God is a God who can be rejected.

In the passage, Israel responds to Joshua's invitation with a decision to worship the Lord. As they say, "The Lord drove out before us all the peoples through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." (v. 18)

Of course, we know something that the people of Israel gathered at Shechem did not know. We know what happened afterward. Old Testament scholars tell us that the Book of Joshua is part of something they call the Deuteronomistic history, which consists of all the historical books from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings. These books were written, edited and put together over several hundred years to tell a single story. The story of the books from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings is the story of Israel's repeated failure to keep the covenant God made with them at Sinai, and of how Israel was finally conquered and lost the land God had given them; Israel went into exile because the nation failed to keep the covenant God had made with them at Sinai. The Deuteronomistic history is written from the perspective of exile, from the perspective of an Israel who went into exile because they had rejected the God who had redeemed them.

So there is an ironic foreshadowing when Joshua tells the people in the verses following: "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God, he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." The people protest, "No, but we will serve the Lord." (v.19-21) We, of course, know differently. The place of this final chapter of Joshua in the Old Testament canon marks the beginning of the rest of the story, immediately followed by the Book of Judges, in which Israel continually fails to live up to its promise to serve the Lord. So there is an irony when Joshua give the people a choice to worship the covenant God. God is holy; if the people choose this God, they will be held to their commitment. If they go back, there will be no forgiveness. We know the end of the story. Despite their confident promise that they will be faithful, the people of Israel will fail to be faithful, and they will go into exile, just as Joshua had warned.

And so a central (but not explicitly stated) theme in this section is that Israel's God is a God who can be rejected. And much of the rest of the Old Testament is the story of how Israel rejects this God who delivered them from slavery.

Turning now to the Gospel reading from John, it is hard not to read the John passage as a re-telling of the story from Joshua in a new setting. John's gospel is also the story of a God who can be rejected. John begins with the incarnation of God in Christ – "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" – but John also says, "he came to his own and his own people did not receive him." (John 1:14, 11) There is a central contrast in John's gospel between a group of people he calls "the Jews," who debate with Jesus and reject his message, and Jesus' disciples, who accept that message. There has been a lot of debate among scholars about whom John means when he says "the Jews." It is clear that he does not mean the Jewish people as

a whole because almost everyone who follows Jesus in John's gospel is a Jew, and Jesus says in John 4 that "salvation is from the Jews." (4:22) The opponents whom Jesus regularly addresses are the Jewish leaders, not the people as a whole.

But in this passage, as in the Joshua passage, there is something unusual happening. As at Shechem, there is a choice to be made. Unlike the Joshua story, there are some who explicitly reject the choice, who refuse to follow Jesus. And those who reject Jesus here are not the Jewish leaders, who had opposed him throughout the gospel, but some of his own disciples. The passage begins: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' And later, "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." (6:60, 66)

Fortunately there is an exception. Jesus asks the twelve apostles, "Do you want to go away as well?" And Simon Peter answers, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (v. 68)

There is an almost exact parallel between Peter's response and the Shechem covenant story in Joshua. Why does Peter confess Jesus? As Israel at Shechem appealed to God's mighty deeds and said that beside the Lord the gods of the Amorites were no gods, so Peter appeals to Jesus: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." As Joshua had warned Israel that the Lord is a "Holy God," so Peter says to Jesus, "We have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of Israel." (v. 68-69)

One way to read this passage would be to read it as a simple contrast between those who get it right, the true disciples (like Peter) who understand that Jesus is the Holy One of God, and that there is no where else to go, and those who get it wrong, the Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus throughout the gospel, and also those disciples who follow Jesus for awhile

and fall away, or, even those like Judas, who betray Jesus to his death.

Unfortunately, John does not allow us that simple solution. As the Shechem ceremony can only be read as the ironic beginning of the story of an Israel that fails to keep their commitment to follow the Lord, so Peter's confession stands as an ironic confession that leads the way to what follows. We know the story. On the night that Judas will betray Jesus, Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him three times – and he does. In the final chapter of John's gospel, Jesus appears to Peter after his resurrection, and asks him three times whether he does indeed truly love him. There is a hint of rebuke here, and John says that Peter was "grieved" because Jesus asked him the third time "Do you love me?" (21:17)

So, like Joshua, John also tells the story of a God who can be rejected. But John goes farther than Joshua. John tells of the God of Israel, who came among his people in the person of his Son, the Word become flesh. But when God incarnate came to Israel, Israel did not serve other gods. Rather, when God came among us, his own people joined with their historic enemies, the Romans, to crucify him. And his own followers, including Peter, who had confessed him to be the Holy One of Israel, fled the scene, or denied that they had ever known him.

If, as Peter confessed, Jesus has the words of eternal life, if Jesus is the Holy One of Israel, if, as Peter implied in his question, "To whom shall we go?," there is no one else to whom we can go, then why do Jesus' own followers reject him? Why is the God who has come among us in Jesus, a God who can be rejected?

John's own gospel provides us with a number of reasons. First, there are in John's gospel two contrasting sets of themes. On one hand are the twin sets of "life" and "light." On the other is the theme of "hiddenness." Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, the one through whom God created the world, the One who gives light and life to all. Yet this light and life is

hidden. John says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." But John also says, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (1:4-5) John writes that Jesus is the "true light, which enlightens everyone." John also writes: he was "in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him." (1:9-10) A central theme of John's gospel is that Jesus' divinity is hidden beneath his humanity. Even his own mother and brothers do not seem to understand him. (2:3-4, 7:3-5) And those who do follow him often do so for the wrong reasons. John tells us that many believed in Jesus because of his miracles. "But Jesus," John says, "on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man." (2:23-25)

Second, there is the scandal of what it can mean to follow Jesus. In the passage that we read this morning, many of Jesus' disciples turn away because of his "hard saying." The "hard saying" is probably Jesus' statement that John records earlier in chapter 6: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (6:53) There is clearly a reference to the Eucharist in John's gospel here, but the plain sense meaning of the passage is that life comes through Jesus' death, the breaking of his flesh and the pouring out of his blood. This was a scandal then, as it is now. In Mark's gospel, when Jesus predicted his crucifixion, Peter found it necessary to correct him. (Mark 8:32) Paul says in 1 Corinthians that the cross is a "stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles." (1 Cor. 23)

The cross is at the center of Jesus' mission. But a crucified God is a God who can be rejected, and such a rejection is itself a scandal that leads to rejection. The ancient world, like our twenty-first century world, worshiped success. A God who dies on a cross does not make the cover of People magazine.

Finally, there is the scandal of the incarnation itself. In response to his disciples' complaint about his "hard saying," Jesus asks in this morning's passage, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" (John 6: 61-62) If Jesus really is the Son of God become human, then God is known in a very limited and particular way. This is offensive then, as it is now. As Katherine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, has complained, "It puts God in a small box." Indeed, the body of a Jewish man who was crucified in a backward province in the Roman Empire in the first century is indeed a very small box for God to put himself in.

In John's gospel, how does the God who can be rejected deal with this rejection? We might well expect, as Joshua puts it, that if God is a "holy God," a "jealous God," that "he will not forgive your trespasses or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." (Jos. 24: 19-20)

Although that is certainly what happened at the time of Israel's exile, at the time of the writing of the Deuteronomic history, it is not what happens in John's gospel.

First, in John's gospel, the God who has become flesh and dwells among us takes our rejection of him upon himself in the cross. Jesus states, "The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:51) John's gospel identifies Jesus' crucifixion not with his rejection, but with his "glorification," the point of the whole story. (John 13:31) Crucifixion is not something most of us would consider glorious. But, according to John, it is in Jesus' death by torture on a Roman cross, his rejection by those he comes to, that Jesus rather embraces those who have rejected him. In John's gospel, Jesus says: "Now is the judgment of this world: now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:31-32) The judgment of the world that follows as a

consequence of our rejection of the God who can be rejected is that God takes that judgment upon himself in the cross. Forgiveness of sins is at the heart of John's gospel.

Second, God deals with the hiddenness of Word of God behind the flesh of the crucified Jesus by giving sight to the blind. At the conclusion of a story in John's gospel where Jesus gives sight to a man blind from birth, Jesus states: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." (9:39) In this morning's gospel reading Jesus says "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail," and, a few verses later, "no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." (6:63,65) So Jesus draws us to himself; the Spirit gives us life; the Father brings us to Jesus. Those who are blind are made to see. These passages have often been used as ammunition in theological debates about predestination and free will, but this is to miss the point. The passages do not teach that God's grace cannot be resisted. The God whose glory is revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ is a God who can be rejected, even by his disciples. But at the same time, this God is a God who gives sight to the blind, and gives us light and life to follow Jesus. We who are blind do not give life to ourselves.

Finally, Jesus invites us to come to himself, to the One who has been rejected, that we might have life. It is precisely this rejected One who is the life and light of the world. As Jesus said earlier in John 6: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (v. 35)

So, very quickly, what practical implications might we draw from these readings this morning?

First, the God of the Bible is a God who can be rejected. That is the heart of the gospel. The crucifixion of Jesus is the story of how when God came to us, we rejected him. When God

came among us, we killed him.

Being a disciple does not mean that we cannot be one of those who rejects God. In fact, we do it all the time. As the old hymn says, "Prone to wonder, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." Often our rejection is not even a conscious decision, but is, as the hymn says, a "wandering." As Jesus' Parable of the Sower makes clear (Mark 4:3-20), it is often simply the cares and concerns of the day that make us forget about God. The very things that cause us to forget about God are the very things that prevented people from following Jesus in the first century—the way of the cross seems a way of death, not life. Despite our best intentions, and our weekly confession of the Creed and our receiving of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we may well find ourselves like Peter, denying the one who has bought us, not by explicit words, perhaps, but only through carelessness.

Second, we cannot get beyond the cross. If the cross is the surest sign of our rejection of God, the cross is also God's only solution for our rejection. On the cross, Jesus has taken our rejection on himself. Only he can bear our rejection of God, and he has done it. When we do fail, and we will, we need to remind ourselves that God has already taken all of our failings on himself in the cross of Jesus.

Third, It is God who gives us new eyes to see. We who are blind cannot give sight to ourselves. As the old hymn also says: "O to grace how great a debtor, Daily I'm constrained to be. Let thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to thee."

Yet, there are things we can do. In the Eucharistic message of John 6, Jesus calls us to receive his body and blood, as they are the source of life. The way to return to Jesus really is to return to Jesus. He is the source of life and light; we are not. And he promises that if we come to him, he will not reject us, even though we often have rejected him: "All that

the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." (John 6:37) As Jesus says in another place in John's gospel: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." (7:37-38)

Finally, despite his own failure, Peter was right. Jesus really is the source of life and light, and there is no one else to whom we can go. When we find that we have wandered away, whether intentionally or simply because we have once more forgotten who is the source of our Light and Life, we need to ask ourselves once again: "To whom shall we go?" The paradox of the cross is that Jesus, who is the God who has been rejected, is also the God who has come among us to give light and life to those who reject him, to bring sight again to those of us who are blind.