

Recently our friends Roger and Janelle Osbeck marked 25 years of ministry with their congregation, Prince of Peace. They invited us to the celebration and we got to sit at the table of honor with other pastor colleagues.

We got there in time for the program and both Janelle and Roger spoke. I was particularly interested in Roger's comments, because he started out mentioning some people in the congregation who had died recently, including the woman who had made the motion to call them just over 25 years earlier. He then went on to name and talk briefly about *all* the people for whom they had presided over funeral services during their 25 years of service. It was a powerful and very moving way to **frame** the shared ministry between Pastors Roger and Janelle and their congregation.

In our first reading, the Israelites are finally ready to enter the land that God has promised them. So Joshua gathers them, all the tribes, and elders, heads, judges and officers to come to Shechem. And there he speaks a word from the Lord. At this momentous time in the life of the people, he chooses to **frame** their story in a particular way. It's not included in our reading, but in verses 2 -13 firmly situates their story into God's ongoing support and care for the people. From the first call to Abraham, to Isaac, Jacob and Esau, to Moses and the freeing of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, to their time in the wilderness, where God gave them a victory over the citizens of Jericho, and the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, (Now our lectors are thinking they are pretty glad these verses weren't included...) God, speaking through Joshua, is reminding the people that God has always been with them and that every good thing they have has come from God. In fact, at the end of that section, God, through Joshua says, "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built..."

Joshua then calls on them, at the moment of their entry into the land God has given them, to renew their covenant with the Lord, ending with his own powerful claim of faith, "...choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua is very clear that he knows there are alternatives they could consider. The gods worshipped by their ancestors, Abraham and his family, in the region beyond the river, the gods of the Egyptians, or the gods of the Amorites in the land where they are now. They may even be tempted to worship the gods of the Canaanites in the land they are about to enter.

The people respond, restating God's care and support of them, and assuring Joshua by saying "...we will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

But if we were to continue beyond our reading today, we hear would Joshua push back. "I don't know... You might want to think twice and be sure of what you are saying, because God is a jealous God and will not look favorably on you if you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods."

But the people assure him, "No, we *will* serve the Lord!"

You could kind of imagine this back and forth going on a bit longer... "No you won't." "Yes, we will." "No you won't." "Yes, we will!"

But Joshua takes them at their word after the second promise, and even calls on them to be witnesses against themselves if they fail.

Looking back, we can see the fragility of the promise the people were making. Because we know, from all that follows, that they *will* fail. The entire narrative of the Hebrew Bible is one of the people's failure, followed by God's reaching out to them again. God sending more prophets. God providing what they need, when they need it. God with them, in spite of the frequency with which they turn away from, neglect and forget God.

We hear a similar dynamic in our gospel lesson.

On this, the final passage in Jesus' explanation of the sign of the feeding of the 5,000, we hear the response of the people to the things he has been telling them, and it's not overwhelming. Jesus' evangelism strategy is difficult to discern at this point...

First he tells the people that he is the "...bread of life come down from heaven." Well they know his parents. They knew him when he was the little neighbor kid. The "bread come down from heaven was tough to swallow. Then he tells them "...those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." In a culture with very specific and particular dietary laws, including laws restricting the consumption of blood, Jesus' words are intended to shock and even offend.

Jesus wants those who have been following him to understand that he is truly God, in the flesh, with them, in front of them, walking with them, abiding with them.

Maybe they couldn't get past the eating flesh and drinking blood language. Which, if those of us who have grown up in the church take a moment to step back and consider, is kind of crazy talk. I always make a point of that when I teach the first communion class with Grace. We show the kids the plate and chalice and tell them Jesus held up the bread and wine and said they were his body and blood. And then I say, "Does that make sense?" "Really?!?"

But it may also be the case that those who have been following Jesus, hoping for more bread, or at least more dramatic miracles, can't accept, can't believe, can't understand the notion that God would come to life in human form, and not just generally in human form, but in the human form of someone as specific and particular as Jesus, whose parents they even know.

Maybe accepting such a notion seems too dangerous, too risky, too hard to understand, too hard to trust.

Whatever it is, they complain to one another, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" Another translation says, "This is *intolerable* language!" Eugene Peterson in The Message Bible

writes, “This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow...” Which, while an interpretive translation, makes a helpful reference to the difficulty understanding and accepting Jesus’ call to eat his flesh.

Because it’s hard, John tells us that many disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus turned to the twelve and asked them, essentially, “what about you guys?” To which Peter responds, with the words we sing most weeks in our Gospel Acclamation, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

I wonder about the tone of Peter’s comment. Was it exultant? Was it a simple statement of fact? Was it tinged with a little bit of confusion, or maybe even a tiny bit of despair.

I mean, he goes on to say “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Believing and knowing are the main things in John’s gospel, and what Jesus is always asking for. Remember, back in verses 28 and 29, when the people ask what it is they must do to perform the work of God, Jesus responds, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

So it seems like Peter has nailed it. Got it in one. Hit a home run, brought it in for a touch down, nailed a three-pointer... Are there any other sports references I could use.

At this point Jesus should shake his hand and tell him, “You got it!”

But not quite. And maybe, in the back of his mind, Peter recognizes this.

Jesus says, “Did I not choose you, the twelve.” (After all, in the end, it’s not about them.) Then he says, “yet one of you is a devil.” John tells us that he was speaking of Judas, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Maybe the twelve aren’t leaving like the crowds of followers that struggle with Jesus’ teaching, and maybe for the moment Peter seems to have caught a hold of some of what Jesus is trying to say, but Jesus knows of the weakness among those who are staying with him. And his recognition of Judas

as his betrayer hints at the other failures that will come on that dark night. Peter's denial and the abandonment of the rest of the apostles in his time of greatest need.

In a little bit, we will be installing leaders of our congregation. As a part of the installation, we ask them to agree to certain terms. They are to see that the words and deeds of this household of faith reflect God; work with other members to see that the worship and work of Christ are done in this congregation and that God's will is done in the community and in *the whole world!* They are to be diligent in their areas of service so that God is glorified and they are to be examples of faith active in love to maintain the life and harmony of this congregation. In all the times we have done this installation everyone always says, "yes." Nobody every says, "Hey, wait a minute!" "That's not what the nominating committee said when the called. I'm just supposed to help sign up Sunday school teachers." "I am *so* out of here!"

On the one hand, we may confess, in our own ways, "Where else could we turn, God? You are all we could want; you give us everything we need." On the other hand, there are *a lot* of alternatives to Jesus that confront us as soon as we walk out those doors...

Maybe not the gods in the region beyond the river, the gods of the Amorites, or Baal, the storm god of the Canaanites... But for sure, we have plenty that draws us away from God, or that calls us to worship that which is not God.

Luther says our God is that in which we put our trust.

So do we put our trust in our bank account? Our retirement savings? Our job? Or status in the community? Our role as a parent or spouse? Do we put our trust in our circle of friends? Do we put our trust in our stuff? In those possessions we have accumulated that say something about who we are and what we care about? Do we put our trust in our technology?

Do we put our trust in our abilities, our smarts, our organizational skills? In our ability to be a good friend, to do the right thing, to know the right people?

Do we put our trust in our skill at imagining the worst that could happen, in an effort to avoid it? Do we put our trust in our ability to consider all the options and dodge the dangers that seem to keep coming our way?

Any of those? All of those—depending on the day and the circumstances?

Sure. Sure we do.

Because we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. And sometimes God's invisible presence is hard for us to see, hard to hear or trust, in and amongst the pressing urgencies of life in our busy, rich with possibility, sometimes dangerous, sometimes frightening and always complicated world.

So how do we take hold of the claim of our faith? How do we live into the promise given us in Jesus?

Well, as the writer of Ephesians suggests, we put on our armor. Not an actual shield, sword and breastplate... Those items of this world and this world's gods won't ever really help us. No, the armor we have from God is that we can put on the new self and new life we have been granted in Jesus, as the writer of Ephesians said in chapter 4, "Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." That new life is the one made visible in the water of our baptism, water present here to remind us that God grants us that life over and over again. It's the new life nourished as we share in the bread and wine, Jesus' body and blood for us, Jesus truly present with us. Bread this week made from scratch by Linda and Cindy. It's the new life sustained as we gather each week as a community, singing again together, "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

We may be drawn away by other gods—those things that are not god and which have absolutely no power to save us and to make us whole. But God never leaves us, God abides with us. When we eat the bread and wine each week, when we eat Jesus’ body and drink his blood, we consume him, abide in him, dwell in his promise and are sustained to live with him always—now and forever.

And, when we make those promises as we are installed as leaders in the congregations, we respond, “Yes, *by the help of God.*”

And the people said...