

August 22

Our Old Testament lesson describes a great and memorable gathering of the people of God. The ancient Israelites were summoned to Shechem by their spiritual leader, Joshua. Joshua's purpose for summoning them was to call upon them to reaffirm their commitment to the Lord, namely, to the God who had freed them from slavery in Egypt. Joshua was the successor to Moses in the leadership—he took over after Moses died in the wilderness, and so Joshua was the one who actually finished the job, bringing the people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. But now Joshua was growing older. He was concerned about what would come next. He was uncertain about the real loyalties of the people. Joshua knew the promised land was full of temptations. There were many different gods one might want to worship. Furthermore, the Lord who had saved them from Egypt had turned out to be “a jealous God,” and one with high standards of moral behavior. Would the Lord's people stay the course, and continue to serve and revere the true God, in spite of the high standards that the Lord demanded? That was the issue that preoccupied Joshua as he grew older.

So he did the best he could. Joshua summoned everyone and put them on the spot. “Choose this day whom you will serve,” he insisted. Make a commitment! Put it in writing! Take a stand. Don't dilly-dally; no equivocation; here in public make your choice. There was no guarantee that the people would stick to it, Joshua knew full well. Humans are fickle. We make promises and don't keep them. Nevertheless, Joshua must have felt that there was something to be gained by causing the people to make

their promise together, as a united statement. It would serve as at least a little bit of a fence around those wandering human hearts, and be a guidepost and reminder in years to come.

So they went through the exercise. Everyone promised. We “will serve the LORD, for he is our God,” they said. It was a dramatic and memorable day.

My Old Testament professor in seminary had a theory that this ceremony was not just a one-time affair. He wrote a book arguing that an event like the one described in the book of Joshua was repeated regularly thereafter, in what he called a “Covenant Renewal” ceremony. My classmates and I were caused to read his book so it made an impression, and its claim about a repeated ceremony of covenant renewal is definitely possible. After all, the idea of renewing promises of loyalty is common sense. Schoolchildren are caused to say the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag. An ancient ceremony of Covenant renewal would have been kind of like that, only instead of to a flag, the pledge was to the Lord.

Now you may be thinking: a service of covenant renewal sounds like a great idea! We should do that in church. I have good news! We do have such a ceremony in church. In fact, every time there is a baptism, the whole gathered community—all of us-- renew our promises too. Baptisms used to be private affairs, something just for the family on Saturday afternoons. But the current Book of Common Prayer has definitely moved us away from that. Now every baptism is seen to be of importance to the whole people of God, and so we do them exclusively on Sunday mornings in church. The

baptism ceremony includes a reaffirmation of the promises of baptism, said by all.

Specifically, the Prayer Book recommends four special occasions for baptisms, during the course of the year. They are Easter, Pentecost, All Saints Day, and Epiphany. If there are no candidates for baptism on those particular days, the Prayer Book recommends that the Covenant of Baptism be renewed anyway. The idea is that it is as good for us today, as it was in the days of Joshua, to reaffirm our loyalty, together. It helps constitute us afresh as the people of God, and renews our faith and hope.

In addition to the four special days mentioned above, there is one other occasion on which a ceremony of Covenant Renewal is especially in order. That is when the bishop of the diocese makes her or his annual visit to a parish. Sometimes there are candidates for baptism when the bishop comes; frequently there are candidates for Confirmation or Reception as well—Reception being for adults coming into the Episcopal Church from another denomination. But whatever the particular situation of any given candidate, the essential thing for each one is to publicly affirm the covenant of baptism. The candidates for baptism make these vows for the *first* time, either on their own, or by means of Godparents making the promises on their behalf. Those being Confirmed or Received *renew* exactly the same covenant, repeating the same promises made by or for them when they were baptized.

And even if there is no one to be baptized, or confirmed, or received from another denomination, all is not lost. The Prayer Book makes provision for

another category of person, namely, those who simply feel led to make a public renewal of their own baptismal promises, for whatever reason, and to receive the blessing and encouragement of the bishop for their paths in life. This is called "Reaffirmation of Baptismal vows." One may reaffirm one's vows multiple times, conceivably, every time the Bishop shows up. It just so happens that our Bishop is going to show up here at St James before long. I would encourage everyone to think about reaffirming your vows on that occasion, and receiving the Bishop's blessing.

Anyone remember what day Bishop Stebbins is coming to St James? Last month I urged everyone to get it on your calendar...

That's right, November 7, Bishop Stebbins will be here. I would strongly urge the congregation to make her visit a time of intentional Covenant Renewal. A great way to do that would be to make plans to present yourself for her blessing, according to the formula you can find on the top of page 419 in the Book of Common Prayer. I think it would be great if basically everyone in the congregation lined up and came forward for her blessing on that occasion, reaffirming the vows of your baptism. It would be a very clear demonstration of the intention of this congregation to move forward together, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So... here is my offer. I am scheduled to lead the adult ed session on Sunday, October 17 at 4PM in the Guild Hall. My topic on October 17 will be a more careful examination of the meaning of the baptismal vows, plus going over the mechanics of the Bishop's visit. I would love to see basically all of you here, on October 17 at 4PM in the Guild Hall. If you can't be there

then but would still like to reaffirm your vows on November 7 let me know and we can go over it some other time. But my advice is to make it as great and memorable a gathering of this congregation's people of God, as was that long-ago gathering at Shechem, convened by Joshua. So to repeat, the other date I would urge you to put in your calendar asap is October 17, 4PM here in the Guild Hall, to prepare for the Bishop's visitation, and your renewal of your baptismal covenant.

Before closing I want to say a word about another moment of choice we hear about in today's lessons. It is told in the Gospel of John, chapter 6. It is kind of the opposite of the gathering in Shechem. At Shechem, everyone came together to affirm their faith in a huge throng. In the story from John chapter 6, nearly everyone went away from Jesus, because his demands were just too strange. It's a sad moment. We read, "Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

In fact, it seems there were only twelve left, the twelve disciples. Jesus wasn't sure about them either. He asked them a very poignant question. "Do you also wish to go away?" If they had wanted to go away, I think Jesus would not have lifted a finger to stop them. They would have to decide for themselves, truly, in their hearts, what they believed. Jesus wants authentic followers, those who are committed to him, even when his demands are strange.

Happily, one person spoke up. It was Peter. Good for him. He said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

*You have the words of eternal life.* That's the one thing Peter knew for sure about Jesus, and he was sticking to it... although of course even Peter's resolve would fail later, when he was tested again, by the strangest thing of all from Jesus, death on a cross. But that's another story, for another time. For today, Peter's simple insight, *You have the words of eternal life*, that's good enough. This affirmation of faith would tide him over at least up to the Cross, and maybe helped him thereafter as well. Just hearing ourselves say the one thing we know, is an important step to take. It makes us stronger, at least for today. For us then, Peter's words are a great model, whenever life calls on us to affirm whatever it is that we truly believe.