Joshua 24:14-15, John 1:35-42

“Choose whom you will serve”

 Well, it is great to be back home after a very good, but hard week at the Shack. Just out of curiosity, how many of you have ever traveled or worked on a team that went to the Shack? It is an amazing ministry and a Presbyterian ministry at that so one we can be doubly proud of. We built a fence around the playground and fixed a whole bunch of electrical problems. Marti and I were a team, the hole diggers, Leo and Peter were a team, the whole fillers, and Charlie and Bob were the electricians with Steve bossing us around. He did that well. We played a bean bag toss game and I don’t want to say who are the reigning undefeated champs, you’ll have to ask the others that one.

 But we also drove out to those houses that needed help, serious help, just to look at some of the jobs that First Presbyterian did in the past. You know we live in a country where people are living in a house that defies imagination because the house is in their name but the land isn’t. Their choice is between doing the little repairs that they can afford or move out which isn’t a choice at all. Normally, in America, we have more choices than most people. And honestly even those people living in those homes have a myriad of choices compared to the other 90% of the world.

 I want to speak to you as Americans today, but specifically Christian Americans as we all look forward to the 4th of July weekend. I have lived in and been to over 30 countries and none have the type of ethic, resources, and sense of blessedness that our country has. None. Even the early settlers and especially the pilgrims saw themselves as the New Israel who had chosen to leave the wilderness of Europe to come to this promised land. We, more than any other people, when we say God bless America, we actually really mean and believe that God has, is, and will bless the United States of America.

 But this also means that our nation has more responsibility in a time when we are very divided. With yesterday’s Supreme Court decision serving as even more of a dividing instrument and the political season directly upon us, our choices as Americans seem to be looming large and weigh heavy upon us. I remember when the whole debate about whether “under God” should be removed from our pledge of allegiance I said on that Sunday in church: “I wish Christians would be so passionate about the Apostles’ Creed as some Americans are about the pledge”. Today I can say that I wish people would be as passionate about their God as they are about their nation and their understanding of the future of their nation.

 In our Scripture today we find individuals making choices that affect them personally as individuals. We also see that what they choose also affects their families, and finally their choices can and do affect their nation. Today, on this Sunday before our Independence Day, we will see how whom we choose to serve will ultimately affect all of those areas: us as individuals, our families, and our nation.

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It was a strange feeling to be invited every year to about a dozen Independence Days for various African countries while we were in Moscow. They were always great celebrations with unbelievable food. But the first year I started attending them I was shocked to learn that Nigeria had only received its independence in 1963, Ghana in 1957, Cameroon in 1972, Namibia in 1990. I could say to my Nigerian and Ghanian friends, well at least we both have something in common, both of our countries declared independence from Great Britain. But the difference, and it was a big difference, was that it had taken place in their lifetime. Very few countries have served as an independent country with its same form of government for as long as the United States, in fact some say the United States is the oldest.

 The Joshua verses that we read this morning are not just words of an individual making principled statements, but rather the leader of a country telling the people that whom they choose to serve in their private lives as Lord of their lives actually made a difference to them and to the nation as a whole. I love this verse and it is a popular one and it is one that the confirmation class gave to me in a frame so I am even more partial to it.

 Look at this verse and you find Joshua giving a history of the people from Abraham who chose to serve God to Isaac who chose to serve the Lord, to Esau and Jacob to Moses and Aaron and now to himself, Joshua. What they all had in common was the choosing of the Lord in their lives that affected their families and all those around them.

 Now they find themselves surrounded by foreigners, all of whom they had conquered, but whose religious ideals and understanding remained very very different but also veryinfluential because they married foreign wives who served those gods.

 Joshua says to revere or worship the Lord and put away any of the synchretistic, new age, modern era spirituality that may have been a part of other people’s culture and ideals, and serve the Lord. But if you don’t want to serve God, that’s okay, choose something else and see how that goes for you. Just like children at a certain age after telling them if you don’t study you are going to do poorly, sometimes they have to have that experience on their own to fully understand the repercussions of it.

 But, Joshua says, as you’re deciding you can be sure that as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. Let’s look at that closely. As for “me”, that is a personal decision by Joshua to serve God. It was his decision, no one else. My house, his family was going to serve God as well. That had already been worked out and it was happening. You do have an influence on your family. In high school, up through my senior year, I didn’t want to go to church but my parents made me. In January of my senior year I came to choose Jesus. Don’t give up on your family or your kids. Finally, the Hebrew is a little wacky because the we is plural and refers to all people. Joshua is talking about the nation. As the leader of Israel he is saying that as long as he is leader of the nation, it will serve the Lord.

 That’s a long jump from a theocracy which Israel to a democracy that we are. But the words in the Gospel of John provide some insight as well to understanding how this personal choosing of whom we will serve can impact our family and our nation.

 4 times the word follow is used to describe what the disciples are involved in, at least in relationship to Jesus. Following is not just a walking or tagging behind. Follow is a discipleship term from John that is akin to abide. When you follow Jesus, you should abide in him. This is crucial from our individual understanding of what it means to choose to follow Jesus. For John it is to abide, reside, dwell.

 How do we do this? Follow along in the Scripture. John the Baptist is hanging out and he sees Jesus walking by and again he calls him the Lamb of God. Right away two of his disciples leave and follow Jesus instead. Jesus basically asks them when he sees them: What do you want? Their answer is precious. It says so much: Where are you staying? 3 times that words staying or residing is repeated, so like the term follow it is important.

 It means where you go I will go, where you live I will live, your god will be my god, your people will be my people. Where do you spend your time because I will choose to follow you there. We know the answer to where Jesus is staying don’t we? We find it in Matthew 8:18-22. Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.

 But that reality must not have been that big of a turn off because once Andrew chooses to follow what does he do next? He includes his family in this decision by going and telling his brother Simon whom we know better as Peter. If you have chosen Jesus as your Savior then you’re going to tell someone to follow along with you. If you see the presence of the Lord in this place then you’re going to tell them to come and join you. A direct manifestation of our love of the Lord is to tell people how we love him and where they can go to experience the Lord and His love. Choosing to follow has to lead to telling.

 As a result Simon comes along and has his name changed. One of the amazing aspects of this country that no other country is able to say that it was able to do except in recent history, is to get people from other countries to come and live here. Some years back we were able to go see Ellis Island. If you love this country you have to go there to see what makes up this country and it gives you an incredibly perspective on immigration when you see your relatives name written in a book. My ancestors were Dutch and didn’t come through the Island but two generations ago came through Michigan. But at Ellis Island we were amazed at how many of these immigrants had their names completely changed and permanently once they arrived in America. The person writing down their names couldn’t understand Italian, German, French, or even Galic. But that change in name also signified a new journey on which they were embarking that most of them chose.

 The same was true for Peter. His name gets changed here as he begins their new personal journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Choosing to follow Jesus has to have some impact upon your life and must make a difference to you.

 So today in our Scripture we see that we are called to choose whom we will serve. As individuals in this church, we are disciples first and foremost and that part of who we are cannot be separated from the rest of our lives. We have to decrease so that Jesus can increase in our lives.

 Once we cross that barrier and put Christ first in our lives as individuals we have to do the same in our families. These disciples left house and home behind and radical change took place. Joshua’s words seem to ring as a rallying call for families all across this land. The family unit is key to this church, go tell your brother to come and worship. Go tell your children to come and worship. Pray for your spouse that they would come and worship.

 Finally, we hear whom we will choose will even have an effect upon the nation in which we happen to live. I would argue that just about none of us chose to live here in the US. We were born here, we don’t know anything different. You know, Independence Day is really a day when people choose which government they would serve. Both sides saw God as being on their side.

 Our nation, at least a majority of it is composed of people who have not had to choose their country or their God, because it is a country where we were born to and a god our parents brought and chose for us. Well, today we have to choose what God we will serve. Because when we follow Jesus, abide in him, then no longer is he our parent’s Jesus, but my Jesus and that makes all the difference.

 You know, a time may come when you will have to choose between your God and your country. You may have to choose between what is legal and what is moral. I know, I’ve lived in a country like that, and I pray that if that were to happen that you would be more passionate for your Savior than you are for your country.

 As Americans, we can’t pretend that God is on our side and is for us while he is against all other nations. God doesn’t work that way in Jesus Christ. IN Jesus all of humanity regardless of nationality has the potential to be used.

 I pray that this 4th of July weekend you will be able to celebrate the fact that you can choose to live in this country where freedom has not been easily won by men and women who chose to defend it while at the same time recognizing that our primary allegiance has to be to choosing Jesus as Savior. Amen.