

## **“Loyalty”**

In commenting on this week’s scripture from Joshua 24, the Rev. Layton Williams references a science fiction show called *The 100*. This show has been on the CW network for seven years. It depicts the future of humanity after an apocalyptic nuclear war. The plot includes different groups of humans who have survived and the catastrophic ordeals that befall them in different ways. Over and over again the, the various groups struggle and face unbelievable hardship. Over and over again, the show raises the questions. What are we willing to do to survive? Who are our people? What does our past say about who we are? And what world and legacy will we leave for our children? Thank goodness we have not been through a nuclear war, but the uncertainties we have faced this year from a global pandemic have caused us to consider similar questions.

In the lectionary scripture passages we consider today from Joshua 24 and Psalm 78:1-7, the tribes of Israel renew their covenant with God under Joshua’s leadership and they are depicted as a people remembering their past and contending with its impact on their future. Joshua reminds the Israelites of their history, that long ago their people worshipped other gods until they made a covenant with Abraham. Like the people in *The 100*, the Israelites have gone through many struggles. Years in slavery, years spent wandering through the

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III  
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church  
November 8, 2020

desert. They have survived famine and war. And God, Joshua reminds them, has led them faithfully through it all.

In reminding the people of their history, Joshua also poses a question. Will they remember where they've come from---who their people are, the story they've inherited---and remain faithful to God in return? Or will they grow complacent, distance themselves from their history, or wander away again to other gods?

The central concern of this passage is the apostasy and idolatry of the Israelites. They assume naively that they can serve Yahweh and other gods at the same time. This is the reason Joshua wants to make it clear to them that they must be completely loyal to Yahweh, that they can serve no other gods. Yahweh is a jealous God and will no longer put up with their rebellion.

After being challenged by Joshua, the people are adamant that they will remain steadfastly committed to God. "Why would we abandon the one who has protected us and liberated us?" When Joshua stresses that God will not abide any unfaithfulness, the people proclaim, "We will be witnesses!" In other words, we will tell the story; we will be a part of the story that is told forever and forever of God and God's promise. On this promise, Joshua leads them in renewing the covenant and the setting up of a monumental stone as a witness to the people's

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III  
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church  
November 8, 2020

commitment to testify against themselves should they forsake Yahweh for foreign gods.

The covenant ceremony at Shechem depicts Israel as a people defined by choosing the God who has chosen them. The ceremony incorporates elements of international treaty forms attested to in many ancient cultures. It is important to recognize the exercise of free will by the Israelites. God still offers them an option for worshipping Yahweh over other tribal gods. Although told of the consequences of not being loyal to Yahweh, they are not forced into choosing Yahweh. In the same way, we always face a real choice as to whether we are loyal to God.

Much later in the history of Israel, the psalmist writes of the importance of not just remembering the stories but passing them on to future generations. The psalmist further emphasizes that the people cannot remember and pass down a rose-colored version of history. They must remember and tell the full truth, including the hard and the ugly and the scary, and only in so doing will God's power and faithfulness be fully captured for future generations to know and believe.

We are a future generation that has received the stories of the ancestors of our own faith, as well as the stories of the Israelites, about their struggles and ordeals and about God's faithfulness. And as with the many generations before us,

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III  
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church  
November 8, 2020

we now face our own season of struggle, upheaval, uncertainty, and ordeal. A global pandemic has upended the world, leveled economies, and thrown both present and future into chaos. Now we are confronted with the same question that once confronted the Israelites. Will we trust in the histories we have inherited and place our faith in God, or will we wander away?

When many of the things we came to rely on for comfort, stability and truth have been tossed into turmoil, we can doubt and waver and despair. Or we can bear witness to the truth of a God who has seen countless generations before us through all manner of hardship than we can scarcely imagine. We can find comfort in the promise that God will see us through as well, if we remain committed to communal care and love and trust.

We must understand what it means to be loyal to God and make Yahweh the lord of our life. We call God lord but do we really know what that means. When one is lord of our lives, that means we put our complete trust in him. We are totally dependent on God for our well-being. We have no other Gods. In our modern society in America, we won't worship Baal. But we have to be careful not to rely on the other gods of materialism, self-advancement, self-responsibility, and self-worth. We have to avoid those who promise us quick fixes or easy answers.

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III  
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church  
November 8, 2020

There are plenty of slick-talking people who will try to get us to follow them instead of maintaining our faith in our one true God.

The major lesson from today is how we choose to answer the question of loyalty doesn't only impact us. Like the faithful long ago, how we choose to understand and tell the story of this moment will impact the world that our children and the future generations inherit from us. In August, Sandi Villarreal of *Sojourners* magazine wrote an article called "Raising the Coronavirus Generation." In this article, the mother of three, who is home schooling while working at home, wonders along with other parents how this crisis will affect the younger living generation. One thing, she writes, is clear: like the crises of previous generations, this one will impact how its own generation of children comes to understand the world, themselves and their faith.

Postapocalyptic shows like *The 100* feel eerily relevant these days in ways that didn't when that show first aired seven years ago. It's true that the characters and the story are merely the imagination of the writers, actors, and audience. But it's also true that our children---and our children's children and perhaps, if we're lucky, generations a hundred or more years from now---will inherit the stories we tell them and the world those stories shape. We know ours is a story of struggle. It can be a story of destruction and despair. But the good news is that we know when

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III  
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church  
November 8, 2020

we make God the Lord of our life, when we focus on the great things that come from God, it is also a story of faith, hope and love that we can pass down to the generations.