

March 1, 2020
Rev. Dr. Jane Florence
Title: "Jesus, a Political Figure"
Text: John 6:14-15 and 18:36-37



I have one more scripture for us today: Joshua 24: 14-15
'Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve God. ¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve.. but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'

Choose this day whom you will serve" is probably a familiar verse. I've seen it on posters and pillows and wallhangings and plaques. Joshua speaks to the Israelites and tells them that have to choose who they will follow. Will they follow the Lord God- or not? We all have to choose who we will follow. and sometimes, the choice is a matter of life and death.

The email popped into my inbox from the GBHEM (General Board of Higher Education and Ministry) one summer day in 2016. I admit; I do not open all the emails from UMC that pop into my inbox. But the subject line was Ecotheological travel seminar. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it was worth a click to find out. When I opened the email, I was overwhelmed with the postcard image of Machu Picchu in Peru. The invitation was for applicants who are "healthy to sustain in high altitude, physically fit to walk high mountains and jungles, and theologically inclined with environmental concerns." Twelve clergy would be chosen from across the UMC to travel to Machu Picchu and into the Amazon of Peru. I applied immediately. I was honored to find out a few months later that I was selected.

After I received my invitation to join the trip, I read the 'fine print' on the travel itinerary. Then I realized that there might not have been an overabundance of people applying! The itinerary included notes on the days that "showers and toilets" would be available. That could have been my first clue on what lay ahead. Nonetheless, I bought hiking books, insect repellent, and in high confidence, I even purchased a round-trip ticket.

It was near midnight the third night of the trip. We had been on the road since about five that morning, after completing the Machu Picchu portion of our adventure. Now, we were headed east towards the jungle expedition portion. First train, then van jostled us along all day, so nearing midnight, we reached our lodging and met our expedition experts who would lead us deep upstream into the Amazon jungle. Along with our instructions for what part of our gear we needed to pack for this leg of the trip and a reminder of our 4 a.m. gathering time, we were handed a paper to sign. I signed mine and returned it promptly. I was eager to find my room and get the allotted 3 1/2 hours sleep that night. My roommate asked me while we were quickly packing our gear, "Did you read that paper?" I said "no. I assume we just signed our life away." she said, "it listed all the ways we can die." It was a long paper; I was tired. I told her, "I prefer to be surprised."

Jose and Taz were our Amazon expedition leaders. Our journey into the Amazon was up the Madre De Dios on two small boats. We felt privileged because we had a Peruvian dignitary on our expedition, we were being allowed to go deeper into the Amazon than most visitors are allowed. I was in the boat with Taz- they are small boats, so we got to know him. As we cruised along the river, he identified all the birds and the monkeys and the caiman, the

South American cousin to the alligator. We asked how long Taz has been doing this? Many years. Good to know. Ever do it at night? my roommate asked. I was shocked at the thought. “A few times, not many.” he said. We had some trouble with the engine in our boat that day. The trouble was it kept stopping. The man steering the boat sat beside the motor kept taking off the cover and banging on it with a screwdriver. That slowed us down several times. Finally, they replaced the motor with the extra one they had brought along. That couch have been another clue.

The water level was down, spring rains were just beginning this day, but they had not yet filled the river. That slowed us down. There were sixteen Americans on two boats, which meant we pulled to the side of the river and disembarked for “rest stops” where there was no “room” involved in that “rest”. That slowed us down. We did not stop for lunch. We were supposed to spend only six hours on the water that day that had started at 4 a.m. As the sun dropped lower on the horizon, we had already exceeded that time by many hours. Taz, at the front of the boat, yelled to the driver in the back, “how much farther?” The reply came over our head, “tres o quatro.... horas” 3 maybe 4- hours! We asked for a stop before dark and noted the caiman tracks on the sand as we climbed out of the boat one last time in dying daylight. It was a beautiful sunset; then twilight; then darkness enveloped our tiny boats- broken only by— the distant lightening of an approaching storm.

Taz climbed up front to straddle the bow of our little boat holding a flash light in each hand- no, there were not any lights on the boat. but there were no other boats to hit us. He swept the beam of light across the water to show the man at the motor all the protruding tree stumps to be avoided. Then his light followed the bank awhile and scanned up the trees. Back and forth his flashlight swept the water, along the shore, and up the trees. Suddenly our boat jerked to a stop, and it list mightily to one side and a slosh water from our wake swept past us. We held on tight Each time we ran aground on a sandbar. Taz pushed us off with a long pole. Sometimes we hit so fast that we really got stuck. As he shone his light across the water surface, pairs of caiman eyes- a hundred or more floated at the water line. He stepped into the water to push us off the sand. Sometimes the young boy working on board joined him in the murky waters. Once the old man who fixed our lunches joined him. “Uno, dos, ugh.” they grunted and heaved with all their might. “nada. again. Uno, dos, ugh, nada. again.” As they pushed against the wooden hull, those of us in the boat began to worry. Our six hour boat ride had gone past the twelve hour mark. We began to wonder, Had we passed our camp site? Who could see it in this darkness? Was Taz lost? What was he searching for it with those sweeps of the flashlight? Every time we hit another sandbar causing the boat to lurch, each of us began to play out our last scenarios. At one point, someone suggested we should put on lifejackets. We did. Should we take off our heavy rubber boots? We couldn't swim in them if it came to that. The thought of getting out of the boat was worse than remaining on the wooden slatted seats all night. Could we just stay on the boat till daylight? That seemed safer than trying to keep going further into a pitch black jungle. Taz had gotten us off the sandbar every time, but did he really know where we were? If he did, why did he ask the driver how much farther? Why did he search both sides of the shore so carefully?

That long night on the river deep in the jungle, I thought of this scripture- it seemed quite poignant. Choose this day who you will follow. We had chosen to follow these men that we had known all of 30 minutes when we signed our lives into their hands. Now we

were being testing- did we trust who we had chosen- because our choice might mean the difference between life and death.

Sixteen hours after starting our six hour boat trip, Taz spoke calmly into our dark fear, “we are here.” On the right his flashlight hinted at a narrow path up a steep, muddy bank. Our shelter for the night lay just beyond our last obstacle. I was thankful for our leader, Taz. He was a man of experience and skill; a man of strength and courage; a man of honor and devotion. He was a good man to lead us. He had risked his life for us. Choose carefully who you follow indeed.

Joshua took over command when Moses died and now Joshua faces his death. Joshua challenges the people, will they continue to follow YHWH God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? or will they forget and be led astray?

Most of us gathered here have already decided who we claim we will follow. We decided that in our baptismal vows. We said we would follow Jesus. We took an oath to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form they present themselves. We pledged our lives to follow Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Christ, the Savior. Each day we are presented with choices that invite us to follow the Way of Jesus, or to choose a different path.

This November, we will choose who will lead this nation. We will vote on senators and representatives- national, state and local leaders, and a president to set the course for our country. If our first allegiance is to Jesus, If we decided to follow the way of Jesus, then that Way must guide all our ways. so then, it would seem, we should examine the issues that are before us. the ones that our current political candidates are debating and crafting as their political platforms, and that we should choose a leader that most aligns with what we understand Jesus to have taught. I do not know who that is. I do not know yet who will get my vote. I know some who will not, but I know it is critically important to this planet and all people who I choose and who you choose to follow.

Jesus was concerned about many of the issues that are before us still. Sure they are nuanced by our time and culture, but the essence of how to act on topics like health care and refugees and violence- Jesus spoke to all of these. So I titled this sermon series during Lent, could Jesus be elected president in America today? I know, he’s way too old- older than even some of our contenders. He can’t show a birth certificate from the states, so that disqualifies him immediately. He is a Middle Easterner and not even a Christian. I get it Jesus can’t be elected president. But can his platform, can his teachings get elected? If there is a candidate, and I don’t know that there is, but if there was one who stood on the platform that Jesus announced as Good News, would we choose to elect Jesus’ platform-?

Some are uncomfortable seeing Jesus as a political person, but Jesus was a community organizer, a social prophet, a revolutionary, and political liberator. Jesus addressed the issues of society; that’s a political person. He was not a political candidate, but he was involved in politics. He did not seek office at all; he avoided it.

In the first text we heard today, “the crowds want to ‘take Jesus by force to make him king.” John tells that about 5,000 people sat down on the grass. Jesus gave them all bread and ‘as much [fish] as they wanted. Everyone ate to their content. There was food left over.’ The people realize Jesus is amazing! He can do great things. He can feed the world! Let’s make him our king, the crowds insist. Only Jesus doesn’t accept the nomination. He doesn’t give an acceptance speech and thank them for their support. He doesn’t start measuring an

oval office for new drapes. He doesn't have a king's robe and crown fashioned. The text says that when he realizes that they want to make him king, 'he slips away quietly and goes up into the hills alone.' He will not be king according to the existing systems of power and authority. He offers his gift of food for all, but he rejects the worldly power they seek to give him. but he did not cease his controversial meddling in the political system of his day-temple and empire allegiance.

The second scripture we heard today comes from near the end of John's gospel. The last day, even hours, of his life take place in a "courtroom" scene where Jesus is charged with being that very thing which he avoided, "Are you king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. Following a kangaroo court which is a total travesty of justice, Jesus is executed by the state. Jesus was not slain by the priests on a religious altar of sacrifice to appease a blood demanding God. I call Jesus a political figure because he was executed by a government on a political cross of treason against Rome- put there by the political leaders of the Temple.

There could only be one king, one ruler of the people. the Roman Emperor claimed that title. No one else could. "So, are you a king?" Pilate asks Jesus are you threatening the sovereignty of the Roman Emperor. Jesus responds, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

What is the truth? we ask today. What is the truth which lies beneath the political rhetoric and campaign speeches? What is the truth which exists in the world? What is the truth to which we belong? What is the truth to which there is no alternative truth or fake truth?

Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us - shows us the way of truth, justice, mercy and grace. The truth is a life of compassion that cares for the marginalized and oppressed. Jesus was about sharing, and caring - especially for poor not about becoming billionaires on their labor. Jesus' truth was about peace, not weapons. The Truth upholds MERCY over any law or human document. Jesus' Truth welcomed the strangers from foreign lands. Jesus fed everyone. Everyone got a handout of food on the hillside. That's the truth Jesus lived and asked his followers to continue

Opponents to Jesus' platform today label these things with negative, fear-mongering words. The teachings of Jesus, empowered by God's Spirit, gives us a template to consider the political, economic, religious, conventional systems of beliefs and attitudes that we allow to dominate our nation in rhetoric and law.

We have the reason and responsibility, We have the reason, responsibility, and our baptismal pledges to set aside partisan politics and choose to follow a leader who will respect the value and dignity of every single child of God on this planet.

We must choose wisely who we will follow, who will lead us on our treacherous voyage through dark waters of our nation's course? Who will risk their own life, their own well-being, who will give up their privilege and safety to ensure the safe passage of those who placed trust in their leadership? In this holy season of Lent, may we dive deep into the teachings and have the courage to follow - for it is a matter of life and death.