

*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost*  
*August 30, 2020*

(Read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud.)

**Prepare for worship:** Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

**Call to Worship:**

*Surely the Presence of the Lord (UMH 328)*  
Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place;  
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.  
I can feel the brush of angels' wings,  
I see glory on each face;  
surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

- Lanny Wolfe

**Centering Words:**

What decision would change your life forever? Choosing this day to follow God is that decision.  
What is stopping you? (*Abingdon Worship Annual, 2020, 241*)

**Affirmation of Faith:** Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

**Prayer of the Day:**

Almighty and most merciful God, from you comes every good and perfect gift. We give you praise and thanks for all your mercies. Your goodness has created us. Your bounty has sustained us. Your discipline has chastened us, your patience has borne with us. Your love has redeemed us. Give us a heart to love and serve you, and enable us to show our thankfulness for all your goodness and mercy by giving up ourselves to your service, and cheerfully submitting all things to your blessed will. Through Jesus Christ our Savior who taught us to pray. (*UM Book of Worship, 551*)

**The Lord's Prayer:**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

**Prayer of Illumination:**

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your word O Lord our rock and redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Epistle Reading Romans 12:9-21

Gospel Reading Matthew 16:21-28

Special Music

Old Testament Reading Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

**Sermon** Whom Shall We Serve?

**Hymn:**

*Cry of My Heart (TFWS 2165)*

Refrain: It is the cry of my heart to follow you.  
It is the cry of my heart to be close to you.  
It is the cry of my heart to follow  
all of the days of my life.

Teach me your holy ways, O Lord,  
so I can walk in your truth.  
Teach me your holy ways, O Lord,  
and make me wholly devoted to you.  
(Refrain)

Open my eyes so I can see  
the wonderful things that you do.  
Open my heart up more and more,  
and make me wholly devoted to you.  
(Refrain)

-Terry Butler

**Benediction:**

God has given us so much, let us go forth to serve God today, tomorrow and every day.  
Amen

**Response:** *God Be with You till We Meet Again* (UMH 673)

God be with you till we meet again;  
by his counsels guide, uphold you,  
with his sheep securely fold you;  
God be with you till we meet again.

## Whom Shall We Serve?

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Times of crisis and uncertainty seem to be the impetus for this passage. It was a time of crisis and uncertainty in the story of Joshua. The land had been conquered. Tribal lands had been allocated. Joshua was nearing the end of life. It was a time of crisis and uncertainty. How would the tribes be governed? How would they relate to each other? Who would lead them?

It was a time of crisis and uncertainty at the time in which the book of Joshua was compiled. Most scholars believe that Joshua is part of the Deuteronomistic history, written during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. This was after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria but before the Babylonian conquest of Judah. Josiah had made many reforms, including the destruction of all the altars dedicated to foreign gods. But it was also a time of crisis and uncertainty as Judah was caught between the powers of Egypt and Babylon. Josiah would go out to fight against Egypt and be killed, leading rapidly to the fall of Judah to the Babylonians.

Even now we live in times of crisis and uncertainty. Even as we come together in this church in person for the first time in many months, there are those who may wonder, "Is it safe?" How long will we have to wear masks, keep social distance, and not sing or recite creeds? When will be able to go back to the way that we used to have church? When will we be able to go back to the normal activities of life without having to wonder if it is safe?

With this backdrop of crisis and uncertainty, Joshua gathers the people to Shechem which would become the center of worship in the Northern Kingdom. Joshua presents the people with a choice: serve the gods of their ancestors from across the Euphrates from whence came Abraham, serve the gods of the people of Canaan, or serve the LORD, Yaweh. Joshua ends with those familiar words we often see on plaques and samplers, "for me and my household, we will serve the LORD!" The people respond that they, too, will serve the LORD.

This choice that Joshua gives to the people there at Shechem in that time of crisis and uncertainty may be one that we may face today in our time of crisis and uncertainty. Will we serve the LORD or will we serve other gods? Of course, you may say, we will serve the LORD, John. Are you crazy? We know it is stupid to serve idols like those made by Abraham's father, or golden calves, or poles. We know there is only one God, and we serve that one God. I mean we are here in the midst of a pandemic to worship God.

But before we go further, let's take note of something here. Joshua does not say that he is going to worship the LORD but that he is going to serve the LORD. There is a big difference. Service does not mean to worship, but means to work for someone or something. Joshua is saying that he and his household are going to work for the LORD. As a good servant he is going to do whatever the LORD wants him to do. When we say we are going to serve the LORD, that means we are going to do whatever the Lord wants us to do. Being here today in worship may be part of that service, but we are to work for the LORD at all times.

As we think of service in terms of working for someone or something, we may really need to reflect, “are there other people or things that we work for instead of the LORD.” In the choices Joshua gives to the people at Shechem, there may be two things other than the LORD that Christians and the church may work for.

The first gods that Joshua addresses are the gods from beyond the Euphrates, the gods of Terah, an idol maker, who was the father of Abraham. Will you serve the gods of our ancestors?

For us today the question may be, instead of the gods of our ancestors, will we serve our traditions? Now I do not mean to imply that traditions are bad. Tradition is one of the legs of our Methodist way of theological thinking along with scripture, reason and experience. Tradition helps to provide a framework for understanding the mission of the church. But we are not to serve our traditions. We often work and struggle to maintain traditions, the way we have always done it, when the LORD may be saying it is time to do differently.

The problem with working for tradition is that in doing so we fail to be open to new, different and possibly more effective ways of being the church. Ashton often jokes that in my family, if we do something twice, it’s a tradition. When she was growing up my mother would rent a cabin near Franklin, NC for a week and the family would go and stay as long as they could. There were many things that we did twice that became tradition. We had to do those things- tubing, hiking from Wayah Bald, cooking hot dogs on the fire, to name a few- every year. After a few years, we were so busy doing those things we had to do because they were “tradition” that we did not take time to explore and do other activities in the area. We worked for our traditions and missed some of what the area had to offer.

When we work for our traditions, we may miss the LORD calling us to do something different. We keep doing the same things, in the same way, maintaining our traditions, doing church the way we have always done it. Some may be grumbling that we have never had church online before, that’s not the way that we have done church. But I have heard from some friends that they plan to come here to Trinity when this pandemic is over because they have followed us online. Ashton and Charlie have been worshipping with us as they participate in the service online. We make keep our traditions as a framework for being the church, but we do not serve our traditions for the sake of keeping them.

The second gods that Joshua addresses for us today are the gods of the land, the gods of the Canaanites. Will we serve the gods of the people around us?

For us today the question may be, instead of the gods of the people around us, will we conform to the people around us? Will we work for conformity? We often do what other people of other churches do in order to fit in. The church down the street and every other church in town has a contemporary service, so we have to have a contemporary service. We hear that you don’t discuss politics or religion because we don’t want to rock the boat or offend anyone. If someone says this is what a Christian believes then we try to believe that same way, even though it may not seem right. I received a mailing last week that implied that if you were a real Christian you would support a particular political party.

When we work to conform to what the Church or Christians should be according to culture, we miss being what we as Christians or the Church were created to be by the LORD. We listen to what culture says, not what the LORD says. Rather than reading and studying the Bible to discern what the Bible says, we simply accept what someone says is in the Bible. Surprisingly, there are many “verses” we have heard are in the Bible but they are not. Just Google “what is not in the Bible.”

Likewise, as a church, we miss the mission the LORD may have for us when we try to conform to what other churches may be doing. The LORD may want church A to do ministry in one way to attract some people and church B to do ministry in a different way to attract other people. As Christians and as a church, we work to conform to the LORD’s will, not the culture.

So, we do not serve or work for tradition nor do we serve or work for conformity. We shall not serve other gods, but will serve the LORD. So answered the people to Joshua. So, we shout in church today.

But wait, Joshua then says to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD...”. We are affirming that we shall serve the LORD and now Joshua says we cannot. What is up with that? By reminding the people that the LORD is a jealous God, Joshua is reminding them that as they covenant to serve the LORD, the Lord is to be the sole object of worship. Joshua had seen the anger of the LORD when other gods were worshipped, like when the people made and worshipped the golden calf while Moses was receiving the LORD’s instructions.

Throughout much of the history of Israel there was a tendency to “hedge bets” and make offerings to Baal and Asherah, the Canaanite god and goddess of fertility. In the Archeological Museum in Jerusalem there is a three-tiered incense altar. On one tier there is the image of a bull representing Baal. On one tier there is the image of a tree representing Asherah, and on one tier there is simply a hole representing Yaweh, the imageless God. This shows just how common the worship of multiple gods was in Israel, which is what led to the fall of the Northern Kingdom. This story was to serve as a reminder for the people at the time of Josiah.

Joshua is saying you cannot serve the LORD, not because of a lack of desire to serve the LORD, but because it is difficult to serve the LORD. It is easier to serve other gods; gods which can be represented by things we can see and touch like a bull or a tree. It is difficult to serve the LORD for the LORD is too great to be captured as a statue or plant. The LORD cannot be seen or touched and it is easier to serve, to work for, what we can see or touch.

For us it is easier to serve our traditions and culture. With traditions we do not have to be creative. We do not have to know when to have VBS because we had VBS on the first week in August for the past twenty years running. We use the same order of worship. We say the same creeds. We pray the same prayers. We sing the same hymns. By serving tradition we don’t have to ... change.

It is easier to conform to what the culture says the church should be. It would be much easier just to preach what people want to hear, that the LORD will pat them on the head and bless them, than to study the scripture to proclaim what the LORD requires. It is easier to listen to the culture or tradition than to strain to hear the still small voice of the LORD.

To listen to the LORD, when the people promise to serve and obey the LORD, "...and him we will obey", this is what they are saying. In Hebrew, the phrase translated as obey literally means to listen to the voice. They promise to listen to the voice of the LORD and work for what the LORD tells them.

When we say we shall serve the LORD we mean that we shall work for the LORD's will. Not our will, not what our traditions say, not what our culture says, but what the LORD says. We listen first to the voice of the LORD in order to receive the LORD's will for us, then we work for the LORD's will in our lives and in the mission of the church.

This time of crisis and uncertainty which we are in, where we cannot do church and ministry the way we have before, may be a time of listening. It may be a time for listening to the voice of the LORD to hear how we are to work for the LORD in our lives and here at Trinity.

The people at Shechem say "We shall serve the LORD" not because of what the LORD will do for them but because of what the LORD has done for them. In the section of this passage which we did not read, Joshua recounts all the LORD had done to bring the people to the place they were that day at Shechem. The people reiterated the LORD's action for them. The LORD led them out of bondage in Egypt. The LORD parted the Red Sea. The LORD led them through the wilderness. The LORD had driven out the people before them so they could claim the land promised to the ancestors. The LORD had gotten them through crisis after crisis. They shall serve the LORD because of what the LORD has done for them.

The LORD has done much for us. The LORD has led us through many crises in our lives. For me it was the sudden death of my older brother, and Ashton having meningitis at 11 months, just to name a couple. There have been many more. I am sure that it will not take much reflection for you to recall times the LORD has gotten you through some crisis, some time of uncertainty.

The LORD has gotten our country and the world through many crises throughout the course of history: the plague, wars, the 1918 flu pandemic, hurricanes, fires and so much more. The LORD has gotten us through so many crises and times of uncertainty. So, we serve the LORD by listening to the divine voice and working for the LORD's will. For we know that as we serve the LORD, we will be led through this pandemic, through this crisis, through this time of uncertainty. The LORD has done it before, the LORD will do it again. Let us serve the LORD. Let us work for the LORD's will today and every day.

# **Protocols for Restarting In-Person Worship**

As we restart in-person worship services at Trinity on August 30, the following protocols have been established by the Worship Committee and approved by Church Council:

## **Preparations:**

Before we restart, the sanctuary and gathering area will be sanitized. The supplies for sanitation have been obtained and this will be done the week before restart and weekly afterward.

Hand sanitation stations have been obtained and will be placed at each entrance of the gathering area. We strongly encourage use of sanitizer upon entering and exiting.

## **Sunday Morning:**

The following areas of the facility will be open on Sunday Morning- the sanctuary, gathering area, the hallway in the tower from the Gunter Circle parking lot, and the restrooms across from the choir room. This is to lessen traffic throughout the building so there are fewer parts of the facility that will require sanitation weekly.

Access doors will be propped opened prior to the service, Exterior doors will be closed during the service and will be reopened by the usher just prior to the end of the service. This is to prevent having multiple hands opening doors in order to reduce potential for transmission of the virus by contact, so please enter through the opened doors.

Receptacles for the offering will be placed in the gathering area. However, we continue to encourage mailing offerings or utilizing electronic giving.

We will require everyone to wear a face covering while in the buildings as this has shown to be one way in which we can prevent the spread of the virus, especially in enclosed spaces like the church building. Disposable masks will be available at each entrance.

Seating will be on every third pew and on the ends of the pews. Pews to remain vacant will be roped off as well as the center areas of the pews. There will be more space allowed on some pews for larger family units to sit together. This is to maintain social distancing of at least six feet which along with face coverings inhibit transmission of the virus especially in enclosed spaces.

The balcony will not be used for seating as the height of the balcony increases the possibility of droplets falling on others,

Chairs will be set up in the gathering area for any overflow or latecomers. We ask that the chairs in the gathering area not be moved.

We ask that you go to your seat immediately upon entering the building. After the service we ask that you remain seated until you are directed by the pastor to exit. This will be by the gathering area first, then the main floor from back to front. Please exit the building immediately. This is to minimize the possibility of people having inadvertent close contact. Close contact greatly increases the possibility of transmission of the virus as does the amount of time spent in

an enclosed space. We do not want to discourage socialization but ask that you socialize outside while maintaining proper social distancing since the risk of transmission is greatly diminished outdoors.

### **The Service:**

The service will be an abbreviated service consisting of prayers, lectionary readings and sermon. There will be musical interludes between readings to allow time for reflection, and special music, soloist or instrumentalist, before the sermon. Again, this is to minimize the amount of time spent in an enclosed space while wearing a face covering.

There will be no congregational singing or recitation of creeds and Lord's prayer. The number of droplets by which the virus is spread increases 10 times by talking and 60 times by singing. Thus, congregation recitation and singing increases the number of droplets in the air increasing the chance of transmission.

There will be no children's church or nursery provided due to the increased diligence needed for disinfecting areas especially for our most vulnerable. Children are very welcomed in the service.

We are awaiting further guidance from the Conference restart task force for ways in which we may have communion that is both safe and theologically sound.

There will be someone taking attendance at the service. If you are visiting, we will ask for your contact information, phone or email. This is for us to be able to follow up should we have someone that tests positive for CoVid-19 that attended the previous Sunday's service.

### **After the Service:**

If after a service you begin to have any symptoms, please get tested ASAP. If you do test positive for CoVid-19, please contact the church office at 803-794-7777 or 803-351-0975 (John's Cell). You will be asked which parts of the building you went into and if there was anyone with whom you had close personal contact.

Once we have been notified that an attendee tested positive the church building will be closed completely for 72 hours. In-person services will be suspended for 14 days or until directed by public health officials. During this time there will be a deep disinfecting of the facility.

Everyone who attended the service will be notified ASAP via phone that someone who attended the service (no names will be given) has tested positive. You should then get tested and follow the recommendations for quarantine given by your healthcare provider. If you do test positive please contact the church office.

These are in place so that people may be informed as quickly as possible that they may have been exposed so action can be taken to curtail further spread of this virus in our community.

We realize that this is very different from the way we usually have church services at Trinity. Some may find these inconvenient and possibly annoying. But our goal is to have a worship experience that is meaningful and safe trying as best we can to balance our spiritual need for gathering and the physical dangers in the midst of this pandemic. The decision for each

of you regarding returning to in-person should be based on your health and your comfort level with the precautions and protocols we have developed.

### **Stay Home:**

Please stay home if you have any of the following symptoms of CoVid-19

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

or have reason to believe that you may have been exposed to CoVid-19.

We encourage you to stay home if you fall in any of these high- risk categories which have been identified by the Centers for Disease Control:

Older adults especially if over age 80

Have moderate to severe asthma

Have a compromised immune system

Have HIV

Have liver disease

Have diabetes

Have a heart condition

Have a lung disease

Have a blood disorder

Have kidney disease requiring dialysis