

SERMON: Choose

TEXT: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

This past June marked the 20th anniversary of Harry Potter. It's hard to believe, but 20 years ago, the world of wizardry, magic and Muggles was unveiled to American audiences with the 1998 publication of J.K. Rowling's young-adult fantasy, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." My family has loved both the books and the movies, and my children can quote nearly every line – with an English accent, of course.

I know that some Christians are concerned about stories that deal with witchcraft and wizardry, but I don't really understand why. The stories follow the classic theme of nearly every story told: the theme of good versus evil. Harry Potter has a natural goodness to him, but he struggles with the evil that is such a defining part of what makes him unique.

In the very first story, Harry is talking with Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He wonders why the sorting hat wanted to place him in Slytherin, the "house" (or group) that seems to attract the mean kids and produce evil wizards, particularly Voldemort, who killed Harry's parents. Dumbledore agrees that Harry possesses some of the same

qualities as Voldemort: determination, resourcefulness, and a certain disregard for the rules. Then he asks Harry, “So why did the sorting hat place you in Gryffindor (the house that values courage, bravery, and determination)?” Harry answered, “Because I asked it to.” “Exactly,” Dumbledore answered. “It is not our abilities that show what we really are; it is our choices.”

In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Harry confesses to his godfather, Sirius Black, “I just feel so angry all the time. What if I’m becoming bad?” Sirius sets him straight: “You’re not a bad person, Harry. You’re a very good person who bad things have happened to. Besides, the world isn’t split into good and bad people. We all have light and darkness inside of us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That’s who we really are.”

From the book of Joshua, we read a passage where Joshua is nearing the end of his life. He has led the Israelites across the Jordan River to the Promised Land. Speaking for the Lord, Joshua reviews their history, pointing out that their ancestors prior to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, served other gods. But since that time, the Lord has been faithful to all the generations from Abraham to Isaac, Jacob and Esau to Moses and Aaron, bringing them through the land of Canaan, into Egypt, then parting the sea so they could escape slavery. The Lord led them

through the wilderness, across the Jordan, and helped them defeat many peoples.

“I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of the vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant.” Now it is time for them to renew the covenant with the Lord. But instead of assuming that they will do so, Joshua gives them the opportunity to **CHOOSE**.

“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, **choose** this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living....”

One commentary I read pointed out that “The expression of the choice is striking in that Joshua does not denigrate these [other] gods at all. They and “the Lord”... are simply given as alternative choices for allegiance.” (Scott Shauf, August 23, 2015, www.workingpreacher.org)

Joshua has given the people a clear, unbiased option. But at the same time, he also shares his own choice. “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

The response of the Israelites is quick and confident: “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

Honestly, I have to wonder if they are a little too confident. While it’s easy for us to say that we will serve the Lord, it is much harder to do – day in and day out – with so many other gods vying for our attention and loyalty. Many of the choices we make are done without thinking. We’re in a hurry, so we choose the easiest, the most convenient, the most expedient option. If you’re shopping for groceries, that’s okay, but I’m afraid that there are other more serious choices for which we also take the easy way out.

I used to be pretty lazy when it came to voting. I hated politics. I figured everyone was corrupt and dishonest. So I voted for candidates that my friends liked, that a particular group endorsed, that had the least offensive television ads, or that belonged to a certain party. But in the last few years I’ve begun to take this

important responsibility much more seriously. I dig a little deeper, trying to learn more about my options than what the TV tells me. I read, I listen, I look for the truth, and I'm still afraid that I don't know enough.

You may be familiar with the popular Christian author, Max Lucado. One of his books is titled, "He Chose the Nails." In one chapter he talks about God's gift of free will. "[God] honors us with the freedom to choose where we spend eternity," he writes. Lucado points out that the thieves who were being crucified with Jesus had a choice. One repented, asking Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." The other mocked Jesus, "Aren't you the Christ? Then save yourself and us."

"How could two men see the same Jesus and one choose to mock him and the other choose to pray to him?" Lucado wonders. "And when one prayed, Jesus loved him enough to save him. And when the other mocked, Jesus loved him enough to let him. He allowed him the choice. He does the same for you."

Jesus chose the nails. He went to the cross willingly. He suffered torture and shame for us. Yet it is still up to us to CHOOSE to worship and serve him or not.

Senator John McCain, who passed away yesterday, spent six years as a prisoner of war in Viet Nam. After two years in captivity, he was given the opportunity to go home. But there were other American POW's who would remain. So John McCain made the honorable, selfless choice to stay until all of them could return home. He chose to endure four more years of torture and imprisonment out of his love and respect for his fellow soldiers and for his country.

Steven Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, said "Leadership is a choice, not a position." (www.brainyquote.com)

We all have a choice – often too many choices – every day of how to spend our money and our time, of how to treat other people, of taking the high road or the low road. We have a choice to build each other up rather than tear each other down, to do what is right rather than what is popular, to work for justice over money and power.

It is easy to proclaim that we will serve the Lord than it is to do. We all have light and darkness inside of us. What matters is the part we CHOOSE to act on. CHOOSE this day – and every day – whom you will serve. May all our choices be for the love of God's people and for the glory of God! AMEN.