

Old Testament Lesson—Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15, 22-25

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

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 vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. "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; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

New Testament Lesson—Romans 1:16-25

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Since being called to this church, I've had the pleasure and privilege of walking alongside three groups of young disciples on the road to Confirmation—three batches of bright and inquisitive and talented children of God.

Being present as they dive into the stories of Scripture, hearing their questions and curiosities, engaging with their doubts—this is where spiritual growth happens. And I've been fortunate enough to witness it time and again. It's one of the most rewarding things I do.

Starting in January of this year, God set in motion a new beginning—my fourth Confirmation class here at Cedar Heights. Perhaps you've seen some of them around at Sunday Supper or serving here on Sunday mornings. A few of them are attending a presentation at UNI with me later this evening. In fact, one of them is running the PowerPoint today. Thanks, Claire!

What's made this experience especially meaningful has been our collaboration and partnership with First Pres Cedar Falls. We've put our youth together—those eligible for Confirmation and formed a class of nine—nine promising young people filled to the brim with Christlike potential. I can't tell you how good it feels to do things together—no greater blessing.

Confirmation isn't something I or anyone should take lightly. The truth is we've been wrestling with some pretty big questions these past three months. In fact, it's one of the things I appreciate most about the Presbyterian Church.

Our tradition actually *welcomes* the doubts we bring. This denomination *encourages* your questioning. We hope you won't just passively accept and swallow what we say from up here. Yes, pastors possess some authority, but we want to *engage you in conversation*.

Every time Dave or myself preaches, we're hoping to create a dialogue with you; even better: a dialogue between you and God—between you and Scripture. You see: All of us bring our own life experience and unique perspectives on these holy stories. That's why each one of us matters. That's why we're interested in what *you* think, too.

We want to know what *you* have to say. And the truth of the matter is we need to hear it. We need one another to get this whole “church” thing right. No one is dispensable. No one—not in the Body of Christ.

Together, I truly believe we can make some real headway when it comes to the biggest questions in life. God has equipped us with wonderful gifts to do so—made in God's image as we are. We've been gifted with reason and critical thinking and community.

And with those gifts, I know we can make real progress. I know we can face the greatest challenges of our day with confidence and clarity. We can do hard things.

And trust me: Confirmation is no cakewalk. For some, it's the first time in their lives they've encountered certain questions—first time they've faced some of the pressing issues of our day—questions about God and evil—goodness and injustice—power and privilege—life and death.

If you look on the front the bulletin, you'll see the curriculum we're using right now with this combined class of nine. It's called “Big God, Big Questions” and involves twelve lessons—twelve opportunities to think about what a lifetime walk with Christ looks like.

During each class, we do our best to surround these students with compassion and safety—to provide a space where they feel they can be honest about what's on their hearts and minds—honest about the Church they experience around them and elsewhere—a Church that (let's be honest) is filled with hypocrisy, divisions, and all the “ism-s” we wish the Church was exempt from.

Because—at the end of the day—when it comes to following Jesus and being a part of Christ's Church—well, that's *their* decision to make and theirs alone. We can't force and we won't pressure them. We will encourage. We'll set a good example.

We'll show them how life-giving it can be to belong to a loving faith community. We'll show them how marvelous it is to be surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, yes. But we're

also open about the enormous challenges we face—honest about our problems as a people and as an institution.

We've promised to give these kids the information they need to make the best decision for themselves. And we'll respect their choice.

After all, everyone is on a unique path: one step forward, two steps back—meandering around—repentance and contrition—going astray—seeing the light—success and regret—getting lost and being found. It's just what a life of faith looks like.

You know: The more I learn and the longer I try to follow Jesus, the more I'm convinced that our faith journeys are a whole bunch of attempts to do the right thing—mixing in more failures that we'd like and just as many re-attempts—lots and lots of do-overs.

Thankfully, God graces us with as many second chances as we need. Rest assured, my friends: Forgiveness is never in short supply.

God's mercies give us an opportunity every time we fall short—an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to God's will—to recommit ourselves to the Way of Christ.

Soon for nine young people, Confirmation will be the first time they make a public profession of faith. It'll be the first time they make this decision for themselves—promising to do their best to show God's love every day.

Of course, those of us who've been doing this a while know that we never get it right the first time. Like anything else, faith takes practice. Doing the Christlike thing takes practice and perseverance—trials and errors.

With that in mind, siblings in Christ, we're hoping this Easter season might be an extra special one for Cedar Heights church—special because of the journey ahead...

If you're like me and you never had the opportunity to be confirmed, then consider the next few weeks the opportunity you've been waiting for.

Consider the coming Easter season a time that we can explore our faith together—a time that we can raise our doubts in a safe space—a time where we're encouraged to ask the tough questions. And we can do so because we know we're surrounded by people who love us.

At its best this can be a season of collective growth and self-discovery.

Our journey together will be framed by the same four “big questions” our Confirmation class has been thinking about for months now.

These four questions are vows we pose to those seeking to be confirmed in the Church. They're integral to that public declaration of faith. What I find so exciting is that we, too, will have a chance to renew our Confirmation vows at the appropriate time.

You can see those vows there on the screen:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Who is your Lord and Savior? Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? Will you devote yourself to the church's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

None of these should be taken lightly. Taking these vows forms a covenantal bond between you and God and this congregation. And though we may break these promises, God never does and God never will. God's faithfulness is forever sure and certain.

Friends: The promises of God are irrevocable. The bond first sealed at our baptism is unbreakable. And at its heart, Confirmation is a powerful remembering of our baptism. It's a reaffirming of those promises first spoken by the Holy Spirit as we were cleansed by water and reborn as new creations in Christ Jesus.

Knowing how deeply we're loved—knowing we are called and claimed—we can enter this Easter season with courage and confidence—confident that God is always with us—with us at every crossroads and on both sides of the Jordan River.

As Joshua called upon God's people to make a choice—to choose whom they will serve—we too will be called to choose. Will we serve the God of love or insist that we know better? Will we enter the household of the Lord, or will we construct a fortress that welcomes only those who look and think and believe and vote like we do?

Will we pursue the truth when falsehoods are safer and more convenient? Will we choose people over profits? Will we refuse to dehumanize and otherize and instead strive with all our might to see the dignity and worth of everyone made in God's image?

Will we finally understand that my freedom and liberty is inextricably linked with yours and theirs—that all oppressions and injustices are interconnected—that your pain is my pain—that we are each other's keeper?

This, my friends, is what it means to not be ashamed of the gospel. This is what it means to serve the Creator rather than the creature. It means we refuse to exchange the truth about God for a lie.

It means we refuse to believe that God has somehow blessed the United States or those of European descent or even the Church with divine supremacy.

As we journey toward the Jordan River this Easter season, I pray we might truly grasp the gravity of what crossing into the Promised Land means—that we might ponder the meaning of those vows.

Because the time for choosing is coming. The Kingdom of God awaits—right there across the waters. You can see the dust from the risen Christ's footsteps in the distance.

I can smell the milk and honey from here.

Amen.