

11th Sunday after Pentecost
 Proper 16 Year B
 Joshua 24:1-2a - 14 -18
 August 23, 2009
 Christ Church Riverdale

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

This is a translation of Deuteronomy 6:4 – the first line of the Sh'ma – the traditional affirmation of the Jewish faith.

The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

Monotheism. It's an idea that we take for granted. We speak of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as the three religions of the Book, the three monotheistic religions. ***We are*** monotheists. And we are so used to this assertion that we don't really question it anymore.

But the passage from Joshua today reminded me that this wasn't always the case. In fact, this reading really took me by surprise. Because Joshua isn't taking monotheism for granted at all – in fact, in this text, he's arguing for choosing the God of Israel as one *among others*.

“Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 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.”

So far, so good, right? That's what we are used to. Put away the other gods, and only serve the Lord. We're on familiar ground. So familiar, in fact, that we automatically read back into the text that he said the other Gods were not really Gods. But listen to what comes next:

“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;”

CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE

Joshua isn't saying there is only one God, and that the rest don't exist. He is saying make a choice for ***this one among many***. The others are still valid alternative. They're just not Joshua's choice. The passage continues with the people deciding to choose YHWH, and it goes on to tell us why they made that choice:

“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.”

Here is a God that has protected them, has liberated them, and has driven their enemies out before them. This is one strong God. This God takes action. As our kids would say, “This God rocks!”

That’s quite a different message from: “choose this God because it’s the only God there is.”

So, what’s going on here?

Scholars date the bulk of the writing in the book of Joshua to a time of enormous renewal and change in ancient Judea. In the 7th century BCE, the Judeans had endured many decades of oppression by the Assyrians, including the cataclysmic destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. Then, unexpectedly, the Assyrian empire began to wane. Judea started to stretch its wings – the people there were hopeful of a return to autonomy - and to power. In a time of great darkness, there was suddenly hope. And with that hope came the psychological need to search for ways to make their dreams a reality.

We tend to believe that monotheism was something that happened right away, in the embryonic time of Moses on Sinai, long before even David’s reign. But this is not the case. The biblical writings from the 7th century show us that the ancient Judeans were struggling with this concept – and that key insights came during this very crucial period. Archeological records show that during this time, temples to other gods and goddesses were systematically destroyed. Previously, there had been many gods called YHWH, each associated with a region or town. Now, an enormous consolidation of power took place, and the worship of *one YHWH for all of Judea* was centralized to Jerusalem. The king, Josiah, ordered the revision of their sacred texts to clarify and solidify these changes – new writings were added, including the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

Most of the writings of this time affirm that the Judeans should have only one God. Our text today gives us a tiny window into earlier times when that concept was not a given – when it was instead taken for granted that there were many gods, and one could choose among them.

Choose this day whom you will serve.

Here in the text from Joshua, we find that echo from the past. Perhaps this passage was one that survives from an earlier manuscript. We will never know. The key point is that it asks the people to actively make the choice **for** YHWH. That was the first step towards monotheism.

The Sh’ma, from the book of Deuteronomy, written in the same time period, takes us a second step: Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. This is the assertion that *Israel* should have one and only one God, a radical idea for that time. They chose YHWH. And **ONLY** YHWH.

But there is another equally valid translation of the Sh’ma that takes us a 3rd step – the final step – the one that tells us that only one God *exists*.

Hear, Oh Israel, that the Lord, your God, is ONE.

Not one God, equally valid among others.

Not one God that you should choose to be loyal to because that God is better than others.

But ONE GOD that *IS*.

So what do we care about this evolution? We've already made that leap – we are already part of a religious tradition that believes only one God exists. Why bring it up? For me, the passage from Joshua started a meditation on the meaning of monotheism itself. What was so compelling about this message that it fostered three religious traditions, not just one? What is the message of monotheistic thinking at its best?

From a historical critical interpretation, one might come away with the conclusion that the main motivation for these changes was largely political – to the Judeans of the 7th century, it created a sense of community and unity that gave them hope. It helped them define their core identity:

They were the people of YHWH.

They were people who chose one God, not many.

But I think a purely political interpretation misses the heart of the story. If that was really the message – there is only one God - I don't think you or I would be here in this church right now. Because, taken to extremes, such a political interpretation can also be seen as monotheism at its worst:

that the rulers of Judea were coercing the people by forcing them into allegiance with the most powerful God,

that the assertion of Israel's need to choose one God was about *exclusivity*.

How often do we hear the claim that there is only ONE God, and my version of that God happens to be the ONLY valid one? Ouch. Such an attitude leads to divisiveness and strife. We can see its effects all around us in the world today. I see it in the continuously unresolved conflicts in the Middle East. I see it in the 9/11 attacks. I see it in the prison cells of Abu Ghraib. I see it in the Catholic Church's censure of liberal minded professors at Union Seminary. I heard it in the voice of my own grandfather – who told me he used to love me until I married my husband “that Jew.”

If the message was purely to say that there is “only one way”, then I don't think these texts would continue to speak to us today. If the core statement was designed to exclude, then I don't think these seeds of monotheism would have sprouted even one great religion, much less three.

Here is the literal translation of the Sh'ma:

Hear Israel YHWH our God YHWH ONE

Remember the steps we went through:

- 1) Choose this God, one among many
- 2) Choose this God because it is the better one
- 3) There is only one God that *EXISTS*

It's that third step that really matters – the step that says only one God *IS*.

God is ONE. This is a message of inclusiveness, not exclusiveness. It's a message that envisions the totality of God's oneness, not that there is one version of God.

God is ONE. And this is our God, a God that we are in relationship with, a God that we are part of.

Just as Muslims are in relationship with that same God.

Just as Hindus are in relationship with that same God.

Just as Native Americans are in relationship with that same God.

The ways they speak of that oneness may differ, the practices by which they acknowledge that oneness may be strange to us, but the essential nature of that one God remains unchanged.

And if we are **all** in relationship with that God, are we not all also part of that one totality? ***Are we not also one?***

In our gospel passage from John, Jesus loses many of his followers because he says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me.” Jesus isn’t teaching them what they expect to hear, he isn’t affirming the cultural norms of separation that were practiced by the Jews of his time. Instead he offers them a resounding call to unity and inclusiveness. He chooses a radical metaphor for the totality of God’s presence in our lives – for the profoundly interwoven nature of our relationship with God and each other.

As Episcopal writer Barbara Crafton says,

“In the Eucharist we eat eternal life, practicing *the oneness* of heaven as we take the body and blood into our bodies.”

As the bulletin you are holding in your hands says: “All are welcome to come forward at the time of Holy Communion to what we believe to be God’s Table, not our own.”

If there is only one God, how can we not all be in relationship with that God? Despite our differences. Despite our practices. And if we are all in relationship with that God, how can I *not* feel compassion for you? How can I *not* want you to be happy? How can I *not* want what is best for you to matter just as much as what is best for me? How can I not love my neighbor as myself?