

It is that time of year. Joshua and his stewardship committee are busily preparing for the covenant renewal ceremony. Excitement fills the air. The tribes gather—young and old, with all their different experiences of God—the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. With great ceremony, Joshua speaks not for himself but for God. God tells the story of the past starting with Abraham. God says, “I took your father Abraham...and led him...and made his offspring many.” God makes the case for gratitude for these mighty acts. Then Joshua boldly makes the “ask”: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” He waits the recommended number of seconds for them to reply. Then they proclaim their commitment. Just to be sure they understand one another, Joshua has them fill out a pledge card, sends an acknowledgment letter, and follows up with quarterly statements so they know how they are doing.

Some things never change—especially our need to recall our gratitude and reaffirm our commitment to God. This covenant ceremony in the Book of Joshua was not a3 single event but a covenant renewal performed again

and again. They asked over and over, “Which god do I serve?” just as we do. With all their different tribes and experiences of God, they gathered to look back and rediscover their gratefulness. They looked back and then forward into their ongoing life in covenant with God. They made a concrete expression of commitment, the Ancient Near Eastern version of a pledge card.

Why repeat this? Well, how would new members of the community get on board? How would children learn the story of God and grow into commitment? Most of all, we need to do it again and again because other gods pop up again and again—like a theological whack-a-mole. They pop up in every season of life and every place in our sojourn, among Egyptians and Amorites.

The Hebrews revered God with their worship and sacrifice. We revere God with our time and money, and many things compete for our time and money. I remember wrestling as a young parent with the \$100 sneakers and the \$5 box of cereal. I remember the unkind remarks from my child’s

peers about our small house and the absence of a big trip at spring vacation.

There are other gods to worship. We get older and other sirens call out.

Recently I opened a letter from doctor, expecting information about my

upcoming surgery. Instead it announced Christmas specials on plastic

surgery—another god to worship. Yet we do need to make appropriate

commitments to prepare for health care and retirement—not to mention

ticking off our bucket list in the time remaining. Other gods are always

there.

Today we have our covenant renewal, our time to choose which god we will serve. I hope we all have made use of the chart provided with our pledge cards this year, the steps that we can take in giving. I hope we all are asking, “Does my gift to God reflect my gratitude?” Now someone at that first step may be immensely grateful—if such a thing can be measured.

Someone in the middle may be a tither, giving ten percent which is the biblical standard we aspire to as Christians. Each of us wrestles with what reflects our gratitude. We were wrestling with the same issue recently in a

group clarifying expectations of a “significant match” from a small church seeking a diocesan grant for ministry. Finally I said, “It’s like pornography. You know it when you see it.” That settled it. We know it within when we make a significant commitment—a commitment that expresses our gratitude, our trust in God, and our desire to be part of God’s work.

Often we have to ask, “But how do we know what the future holds?” Some of us do not pledge because we do not have guarantees about our income or about the circumstances of our life and health. Yet the Hebrews wrote the book on uncertainty. The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids speaks to the first followers of Jesus dealing with the uncertainty of the Second Coming of Christ. How were they to live in the time in between, in the uncertainty of when and how God would act?

Jesus took a story line used by others in his day to give us a vision of the Kingdom of God and the realities of waiting for its fulfillment. Ten bridesmaids—an odd detail. But ten represented fullness, completion, and

perfection. Those ten are enough to complete the vision, to manifest the Kingdom of Heaven.

Yet the foolish ones “act according to their own expectations.” (W. D. Davies) They prepare but only so much. Maybe they are overly optimistic about their own ability to make the oil last or about how fast the groom will arrive. They miss out when they do not set the bar high. The best advice I remember as a parent during the middle school years came from the school counselor: “Remember your children will live down to your expectations.” So it is with God who is capable of so much more than we expect and prepare for.

The wise bridesmaids also go to sleep, but they prepare for the delay. Probably the punch line is better translated, “Be prepared” rather than “Keep awake.” We are called both to trust in God and to be prepared for the time in between. We must wait for the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven through all the trials and uncertainty. As Tom Long says, “The wise ones in the church are those who are prepared for the delay; who hold on to the faith

deep into the night; who, even though they see no bridegroom coming, still serve and hope and pray and wait for the promised victory of God.”

(Matthew, p. 281) Indeed we must be ready for God to surprise us in the darkness as well as the light. After all, as it has been said, “Surprise is a name of God.” (David Steindl-Rast)

We are called to the pilgrim life. Our gratefulness guru says again, “We overcome by joining the daring of the wanderer to the daring of the settler, and that gives us the courage of a pilgrim...Hope is the virtue of the pilgrim.” (David Steindl-Rast, p. 125) We need one another in this. Some of us, both young and old, are wanderers, open to risk and looking in new ways at our ministry. Others are settlers, embodying the value of the foundation of what has been and what sustains us. As we share those gifts, we become pilgrims together, with a goal and a commitment that we call the Kingdom of Heaven. As pilgrims we live in hope, ready for God’s surprise.

That Hope with a capital H is bigger and better than our hopes plural. Our particular hopes can get in the way because we bridesmaids can be

foolish in our expectations both about what God can and will do in our lives.

In this season of gratitude, many of us have discovered that being attentive allows us to be surprised by God. Our eyes have been opened to blessing and thus to gratefulness. As Brother David says, “The eyes of hope are grateful eyes.” (p. 142) and finally, “...only gratefulness, in the form of limitless openness for surprise, lays hold of the fullness of life in hope.” (p. 162) In our gratitude we discover our passion for the possible, rooted in true hope. That is what empowers us to act in hope even in the midst of uncertainty. We go forward as people of hope, “with clear eyes and rolled-up sleeves,” as Brother David says, wise ones with our flasks of oil prepared.

Today we choose which god we will serve. Let us renew our covenant with God as pilgrims who act in hope. May we be open to all the ways God surprises us. In the meantime, let’s fill our flasks with oil. May God bless us with clear eyes and rolled-up sleeves that God’s power might accomplish in us infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.