

**Worship Service from First Presbyterian Church of Magnolia**  
**Sunday, May 21st, 2017**

*The liturgist and pastor will meet in the hall outside the choir room at about 10:40am. The liturgist will enter followed by the pastor. The pastor will step into the pulpit, welcome everyone, & do to help. The preacher will then ask...*

“Are there any other announcements or concerns of the church that need to be made known at this time?..... Thank you.”

*The preacher will take a seat.*

**PRELUDE**

**Dr. Elizabeth Davis**

**"Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above" - Richard A. Williamson**

*After the Prelude, the liturgist should step to the lectern and say,*

“Would you join me in reading the responsive call to worship adapted from Psalm 24 and printed in our bulletins?”

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

(adapted from Psalm 24)

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;

**For he has founded it on the seas, & established it on the rivers.**

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?

**Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.**

They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.

**Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.**

Let us worship God beginning by with prayer...

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION**

Let us pray... O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Would all of you who are able please stand with me and join in singing our opening hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”, #376 in our hymnals.

*The liturgist should step back from the microphone for the hymn.*

**\*HYMN OF PRAISE**

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

*The Hymnal #376*

*After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...*

**\*CALL TO CONFESSION**

We have been irrevocably adopted as children of God. Yet we are often intimidated by our fears, and seduced by our fantasies. God wants us to repent, and we need to confess and begin the healing that comes from accepting Christ's grace. Therefore, let us pray together the prayer of confession as it is printed in our bulletins, pausing at its end for a time of silent confession. Let us pray...

**\*PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

O God, we confess that we have loved our own way more than we love you. The Spirit of truth does not abide in us, for our actions belie the words of praise we utter in worship. We neglect the spiritual disciplines that would draw us close to you and the caring outreach that would link us with sisters and brothers who need to know of your love. We have not witnessed to our faith in ways powerful enough to evoke opposition or cause us to suffer. We have not loved you or others as much as we love our own selves. O God, it is hard to follow Jesus! Forgive us, teach us; help us! Amen.

**\*SILENT CONFESSION**

*(Pause for about 30 seconds of silence.)*

**\*THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

You have not been left to struggle alone. You have an Advocate who is always with you. God hears your prayers and offers you steadfast love in all circumstances. Do not be afraid to hope, and to share that hope with others around you.... Friends, believe the Good News!

**In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!**

\*GLORIA PATRI

*The Hymnal #579*

***Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;***

***As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end. Amen, Amen.***

\*PASSING OF THE PEACE

Having been reconciled to the Father through the grace of His Son, let us also be reconciled to one another and share Christ's peace. The peace of Christ be with you.

**And also with you.**

*Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.*

*After a few moments, liturgist will step into the lectern and say...*

"At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord brought to them by Ms. Karen."

*The liturgist will take a seat.*

CHILDREN'S SERMON

*(All Singing)*

***Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;***

***Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;***

***Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.***

*The preacher will step to the pulpit and say, "I would invite all who are able to stand and join in singing the hymn "How Firm a Foundation", #361 in our Hymnals.*

\*HYMN OF PREPARATION

"How Firm a Foundation"

*The Hymnal #361*

*After the hymn, the liturgist will return to the pulpit and say,*

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

God has a right to the fruits of our labor. In response to the overwhelming gift of His goodness and His grace, let us return a portion of God's bounty as we continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings...

*The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.*

THE OFFERTORY

**Dr. Elizabeth Davis**

**"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" - Richard A. Williamson**

\*DOXOLOGY (In Unison)

*The Hymnal #592*

***Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below;***

***Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.***

*After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...*

\*OFFERTORY PRAYER

Let us pray... God of all people, may all that we give today be used to express your love among us and beyond us. We are thankful for your gift to us in Christ Jesus, who was so committed to sharing your love that he risked rejection and death. May Christ live today in us-- in our caring, in our giving, in our speaking, in our doing. Follow us and the gifts we bring, so that through them, Christ may transform our church and our world in keeping with your will. Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

"The Apostle's Creed"

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the traditional words of the Apostles' Creed printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

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 Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on 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 Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

*Invite the congregation to... "Be seated," and take a seat.*

SPECIAL MUSIC

**"Holy, Holy, Holy!"**

**John Allen Gean, Baritone**

*After the soloist finishes, the Liturgist will return to the lectern & say....*

## SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our gospel reading this morning is taken from the fourteenth chapter of John, beginning at the fifteenth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 939 in your pew bibles. Listen now for the word of God...

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you."

*The liturgist will take a seat, on the Chancel or with the congregation.*

*The preacher will then return to the pulpit and say...*

Our Sermon text for this morning is found in the Book of Deuteronomy, the twenty-seventh chapter beginning with the 4th verse, as opposed to the first verse which may have been noted in your bulletins. It is, I am fairly sure, a part of God's story which you have never heard before, so rather than following along, just listen closely as we read it. Listen once more for the Word of God....

"And when you have passed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you this day, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall lift up no iron tool upon them. You shall build an altar to the LORD your God of unhewn stones; and you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God; and you shall sacrifice peace offerings, and shall eat there; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God.

And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly."

And Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, "Keep silence and hear, O Israel: this day you have become the people of the LORD your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the LORD your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you this day."

And Moses charged the people the same day, saying, "When you have passed over the Jordan, these shall stand upon Mount Ger'izim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Is'sachar, Joseph, & Benjamin.

And these shall stand upon Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zeb'ulun, Dan, & Naph'tali.

And the Levites shall declare blessings and curses to all the men of Israel with a loud voice. And all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Leader: ...This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

## THE SERMON

"Voices and Choices"

A young father won a toy in a drawing held to mark the opening of a new discount store. He called his five kids together to ask which one should have the present.

"Who is the most obedient?" he asked.

The children all stared back at him in silence.

Then he asked, "Who never talks back to mother?"

Again, the kids appeared to be mystified by the question.

Then Tom asked, "Who does everything she says?"

With that question, the kids were finally able to come to a conclusion. The five small voices answered in unison, "Okay, Dad, you get the toy."

**MORAL:** Life comes with choices, and choices have consequences. But life also comes with voices that guide us to make the right choices.

That is the purpose of this weekend side trip to Shechem taken by a million or so Hebrews in the middle of their military campaign to seize control of the Promised Land.

The pilgrimage to Shechem was Moses' idea (Deut. 27:4-8). He had instructed Joshua to bring their invasion of the Promised Land to a halt and march every man, woman, and child to the Valley of Shechem, twenty-miles away.

Once they reached the valley, Joshua set about the task of building an altar of unhewn stones as he had

been instructed.

It was customary at that time for kings to commemorate their conquests on huge stones covered with plaster. Joshua, however, wasn't memorializing a conquest but commitment. He knew that the secret to the future success of the Hebrews was not the strength of the army but the resolve of the people to keep God's commandments. Their victories over the Canaanites would never come, unless they were preceded by an unconditional surrender to God.

The meadows of Shechem sit between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Gardens, orchards, and olive groves grow throughout the valley. Limestone stratum sits in the deepest part of the crevice, broken into ledges "so as to present the appearance of a series of regular benches." The rock formation creates an amphitheater with acoustic properties that allow a sound originating on one side of the valley to be heard on the other.

The tribes were assigned their places: six on one side and six on the other. Midway between stood the priests, Levites, leaders, and the ark of the covenant. When Joshua and the Levites read the blessings, the tribes standing on Gerizim shouted, "Amen!" When the leaders read the curses, the million or so people on Ebal declared, "Amen!"

Can you imagine the drama of the moment? .... "If you listen obediently to the voice of God; he will ... "Defeat your enemies!" .... "Amen.

"Order a blessing on your barns!" .... "Amen.

"Lavish you with good things!" .... "Amen.

"Throw open the doors of his sky vaults & pour rain on your land" (see Deut. 28:1-13). .... "Amen.

The proclamation of the curses followed the same pattern. "Cursed is anyone who ...

"Carves an image of god." ..... "Amen.

"Demeans a parent!" ..... "Amen.

"Takes a bribe to kill an innocent person." ..... "Amen!" (see Deut. 27).

Back and forth, back and forth. Voices reverberated off the stone cliffs. All the people-- children, immigrants, old-timers, everyone in antiphonal rhythm proclaimed their values. "*There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them*" (Josh 8:35).

Keep in mind the when and where of this assembly. When did this event happen? **In the midst of an invasion.** Where? Smack-dab **in the middle of enemy territory.** These people hardened by hundreds of years as slaves and 40 years in the desert wilderness, pressed the "Pause" button on the physical battle in order to fight the spiritual one.

Heeding God's Word is more critical than fighting God's war.

Indeed, heeding God's Word *is* fighting God's war. Conquest happens as the covenant is honored.

Do you want to experience all that God has promised you? Obey God's commands.

What's that? You expected something more mystical, exotic, intriguing? Did you really think that the abundant life came from ecstatic utterances or angelic visions, mountaintop moments or midnight messages from heaven?

Sorry to disappoint you.

"Obedience," wrote C. S. Lewis, "is the key to all doors." Don't think for a second that you can heed the wrong voice, make the wrong choice, and escape the consequences.

At the same time, obedience leads to a waterfall of goodness not just for you but for your children, children's children, great-grandchildren, and the children of a thousand generations in the future. God promises to show "love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6 NIV).

I suppose almost all of us have seen one big screen version of this true to life story, with the hero, Fletcher Christian, played by Clark Gable, Marlon Brando, or Mel Gibson. In the spring of 1789 a band of mutinous sailors settled on this tiny dot four thousand miles east of New Zealand in the South Pacific. Angered by the harsh rule of Captain Bligh, the mutineers had given him and his followers the boot and a

boat and watched them float out to sea.

Captain Bligh made it to safety and eventually testified against the crew of the HMS *Bounty*. But what became of those sailors who settled on Pitcairn? The men had taken Tahitian wives on their way to Pitcairn, and when they arrived at their ultimate destination, they sought to enslave the male residents of the island. They had the opportunity to create a stable society, but instead they created a swamp of violence, adultery, and drunkenness. They elevated no standard, lived by no moral code. Within a decade they were dead from disease and attacks. Only one mutineer survived. Alexander Smith.

Left on the two-square-mile island, he began to read the Bible.

He later testified, "When I came to the Life of Jesus, my heart began to open like doors swingin' apart. Once I was sure God was a loving and merciful Father to them that repent, it seemed to me I could feel His very presence ... and I grew more sure every day of His guiding hand."

Smith convinced the islanders to follow the teachings of Scripture.

When the British navy discovered Pitcairn Island in 1808, they were stunned by the order and decency. The island had been transformed.

Smith was pardoned, and Pitcairn became synonymous for piety in the nineteenth century.'

Obedience leads to blessing. Disobedience leads to trouble. Remember Jesus' parable about the two builders who each built a house. One built on cheap, easy-to-access sand. The other built on costly, difficult-to-reach rock. The second construction project demanded more time and expense, but when -the spring rains turned the creek into a gully washer, guess which builder enjoyed a blessing and which experienced trouble. Beachfront property doesn't make for much if it can't withstand the storm.

According to Jesus the wise builder is "whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them" (Matt. 7:24). Both builders heard the teachings. The difference between the two was not knowledge and ignorance, but obedience and disobedience.

As Mark Twain once said, "It ain't what we know that gets us into trouble, it's all those things we think we know that just ain't so." The truth is, we don't really break the commandments. They have stood strong and true for well over 4000 years. We can, however, break ourselves on them. That is why security comes as we put God's precepts into practice.

35 years ago when I was in Princeton, New Jersey for training with a former employer who had hired me as a drug rep, we went to a reception one evening hosted by the new President of the company. When we got back to the hotel, the others in my training class were tired and wanted nothing more than to go to bed. My stomach however, thought my throat had been cut and was demanding satisfaction, so I walked out of the lobby and down the street to a shop that specialized in Philly Cheesesteak sandwiches. On the way, I noticed two very attractive women standing on the corner near my hotel and a local theater. I assumed they had just left the theater and were waiting on a taxi.

"Excuse me, sir," one of them said. "Could you use some company tonight."

I was taken aback. I was a Texarkana boy, and back home, attractive women had never been prone to flirt so brazenly with me. My abs are congenitally absent and I haven't pumped any guns since my lone dove hunting trip 15 years before. Then, DUH, it dawned on me; they weren't interested in my body, but my wallet. I represented nothing more to them than a paycheck for services rendered. This verse popped into my thoughts from Proverbs 2: "You will be saved from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, for her way leads down to death, and her paths to the shades..."

Suddenly I recognized the danger in front of me, made my excuses and wished them well, bidding them a good night. I hurried back to the hotel, where I immediately called my wife. What if I hadn't? What if I had followed their siren song, listened to their voice instead of the voice of God?

Voices await you today. Maybe not on a street in Princeton or Shreveport, or Little Rock.... but at work, in your neighborhood, at school, at your club, on the Internet. They're waiting for you. They stand at the intersection of your social life and family calling out to you, telling you that your choice only matters in that you will lose this one opportunity for pleasure, or profit, or power if you don't act now. They tell you that know one will ever know. But that is a lie. You will know. God will know. You can't eliminate

the voices that call to you from the shadows. **But you can prepare for their invitation.**

Remember who you are. You are God's child. You have been bought by the most precious commodity in the history of the universe: the blood of Christ. You are indwelled by the Spirit of the living God. You are being equipped for an eternal assignment that will empower you to live in the very presence of God. You have been set apart for a **holy** calling. You are his.

Remember where you are; this is Canaan. You are in the Promised Land, not geographically but spiritually. This is the land of grace and hope and freedom and truth and love and life. The devil has no jurisdiction over you. He acts as if he does. He walks with a swagger and brings temptation, but if you listen to James, as you resist him and turn to God, he must flee (James 4:7).

Decide now what you will say then.

Choose obedience. And, as you do, you can expect blessings: the blessing of a clean conscience, the blessing of a good night's sleep, the blessing of God's fellowship, the blessing of God's favor. This is no guarantee of an easy life. It is the assurance of God's help. Psalm 34 promises, "The good man does not escape all troubles-- he has them too. But the lord helps him in each and everyone".

One final thought before we leave the Valley of Shechem. Take note of the altar's location. The altar made with unhewn stone.... where was it built? Not on Gerizim, the mount of blessing. No.

Joshua built it on Ebal, the hill of the cursing. Even in the midst of poor choices, there is grace.

May we hear the right voice. May we make the right choice. May we enjoy blessing upon blessing.

But if we don't, may we return to the altar on Ebal. It was built for people like us. **THE PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD'S PRAYER**

Would you pray with me?...

O God, our Father, grant that nothing may stop us doing what we ought to do and being what we ought to be. Grant that laziness may not stop us doing the work we ought to do; Fear may not keep us from taking the stand we ought to take; selfishness may not stop us giving the service we ought to give.

Grant that ingratitude may not stop us being as grateful as we ought to be; indifference may not stop us caring as we ought to care; self-will may not stop us obeying you as we ought to obey.

Grant that lack of perseverance may not stop us finishing the things we have begun; lack of discipline may not make us take the easy way; lack of foresight may not make us choose the things which bring nothing but regret.

Grant that despair may not make us stop trying; discouragement may not make us give up and give in; Pessimism may not take our hope away.

Grant such wisdom of mind; such strength of will; such devotion of heart; that we may not even desire to do anything except the things that please you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray saying...

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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Let all of us who are able stand and join in one voice to sing our hymn of dedication, "When I Had Not Yet Learned of Jesus", hymn #410 in our hymnals.

\*HYMN OF DEDICATION      "When I Had Not Yet Learned of Jesus"      *The Hymnal #410*  
(to the tune of "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart")

\*THE BENEDICTION

\*CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE      "Sanctuary"

Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true;  
With thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for You.

\*POSTLUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis