

Shechem  
Reading from the Old Testament: Joshua 24:1-15  
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 6:24

We didn't move often during my childhood, but we moved enough that my sense of place is not as engrained as those for whom place of origin is a location shared by generations of a family. I waffle when asked about my hometown, because I'm not quite sure which town to describe, the town where I went to elementary school or the town where I went to high school, neither of which is the town where my parents were raised or the town where they now live. In the end, it is hard to say who I am without referring to all four. I have lived in my current house for fourteen years, which is at least a third longer than any other place I have lived. So, for me home is more of a story than a location.

In contrast, we have former members who have moved a couple of times since leaving Charlotte, and yet, throughout the summers and at each holiday, we see photos of a lakeside lodge in the Pennsylvania Poconos filled with generations of family members gathered as they have for decades, sharing traditions with crowds of cousins and lake dwellers from generation to generation. It provides the family, and

particularly the young ones, a powerful sense of place that makes a lasting imprint on their identity.

Perhaps you know, and are to a certain extent identified by, such a place, and when you go there, you tend to do a lot of reminiscing and reengaging an important part of you that has been buried under life's current calendar of chaos and crisis. *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Judge*, *This Is Where I Leave You*, *Guess Who*, just a few of the countless movies with folks returning to their hometown, a journey that always includes a scene of folks gathered around some totemic local landmark that carries memories of adolescent adventures. The water tower. The town square. The drive-in movie theatre or hamburger joint. The train trestle; watering hole; or swimming hole. The scenes offer up the same sentiment that compels us to torture our kids with all those hometown drive-bys: "That's where I fell off the monkey bars in the third grade;" "That's where I proposed to your mom. We etched our initials on the trunk of that willow oak" It makes your kids' eyes roll, but it is one of the ways you can remind yourself where and how you became you.

We mark important memories by place, and Shechem was one of those places for the descendants of Abraham. When you mention Israel,

you think Jerusalem, or maybe Bethlehem, but as a place of significance, Shechem would also have to make the short list. Shechem is the first place the Lord spoke to Abraham upon entering Canaan, the land of promise. “To your offspring I will give this land.” Abraham built an altar there to commemorate it.

Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, would also travel to Shechem, and he too would build an altar there. In addition, Jacob would buy a plot of land at Shechem, a purchase that will play a significant role in Israel’s story some 400 to 500 years later when, as we read in today’s text, Joshua gathers the tribes at Israel. In this narrative, we are told, “The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor ... it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.” Imagine the emotions suffusing that ceremonial burial of the bones of Joseph in the very place the Lord had told Abraham, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

This sacred space called Shechem offers a meaningful backdrop to Joshua’s speech to Israel in this new land of promise. You see, hundreds of years before, after Jacob had purchased the plot of land in Shechem,

he called together all of his household and all who were with him, and said, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; 3 then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." 4 So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem."

With this communal memory in mind, Joshua gathers Israel at Shechem, and after reviewing the history of God's saving acts that delivered Israel to this land of promise, Joshua says, 14 "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

In the same location as Jacob in a land often called promised, Joshua offers Israel the same challenge that Jacob offered his people long before. Put away, throw away the gods, the idols you venerate and cling to; put them away, bury them, and serve the Lord in sincerity and faithfulness.

What is the promise of the promised land? We have folks here with a wealth of experience in agriculture, in business, in real estate, and they could give us some pretty good advice on the prospects that come with a particular piece of property, things that would make it a promising investment. Is it fertile? Does it have good soil? What about natural resources? Could I be the next Jed Clampett out lookin' for some food and up through the ground comes a bubblin' crude?

What about the neighborhood? Will I have any problems with the neighbors? When we were preparing to travel to Turkey in the days before the political upheaval there, the Syrian War was encroaching on their southern border, and next to that Iraq was still reeling from war. On the western border, you had the tense standoffs between Iran and a good percentage of the globe. Add to that, the huge flow of refugees fleeing all sorts of dangerous places, and I remember one of our hosts

referring to their home country as a peaceful place in a bad neighborhood.

Our real estate folks spend much of their days answering questions about the neighborhoods. Schools, ascendant property values, prestige. How many folks are driven by the idea that the promised land has a name: Eastover, Myers Park, Ballantyne? How many folks truly believe the promised land is defined by where you live, what you drive, what you wear, what brands you consume? From the craning of necks at the Heart Ball to the revving of Hemis at the truck rally, to the lyrics of the Hip-Hop smash hit, the promised land is all about the bling for anyone infected by the contagion of affluenza.

Unfortunately, such a promise is often revealed to be empty. After all, though Shechem checked all the boxes on the real estate agent's list, location, resources, fertile soil, strategically located on ancient highways; by the time Jesus shows up in the Bible narrative, Shechem is no more.

What gives a place its promise is revealed in the Promise-giver. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses challenges Israel: "12 So now, O Israel,

what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.” A couple of verses later, Moses describes the path of promise: “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. 17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” That’s what gives a place its promise.

And so, Joshua entreats Israel at a place called Shechem. "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.” Our service to God is not for God’s ego, but for our own well-being. The voice of the Lord states this

plainly in Jeremiah, “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Even in the face of trial and tribulation, the power of the promise remains. As the Psalmist confesses: The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. 10 And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.” What is the invitation to promise that Jesus offers, 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

What are the gods, the idols, you need to bury so that you may live into the promise you already have? In a way, this place is Shechem, and each week in the worship of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, we are invited to bury the idols that shackle us and embrace the tie that binds us.

“Serve him in sincerity and faithfulness.” The word for serve is used 9 times in our text today and 6 additional times in this chapter.



The prophet Micah tells us what this looks like. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” We see this charge revealed and lived out in the person of Jesus. As Karl Barth reminded us last week, “Jesus does not point us to the kingdom of heaven; he himself is the way.” Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly, in the way of Christ. This is what gives a place promise, no matter the where and what of the place you find yourself right now.

Did you see the story this week about what’s happening on Troost Avenue in Kansas City? For decades this urban, north-south thoroughfare had a notorious reputation. KC’s mayor said it was like the demarcation line in a war-zone. A once thriving commercial center, the road became a place you did not visit and certainly wouldn’t cross. And it had happened by design. A prominent developer, J.C. Nichols, pioneered the use of racial covenants in neighborhoods. Building contracts prohibited anyone of African descent from living in neighborhoods west of Troost Ave. But things are changing on Troost

Ave. as individuals and community groups do the work of justice, kindness, and humility. The Urban Café, which started as a food truck and is now renovating a second larger building to meet demand, has been instrumental in transforming what was a food desert. As with many troubled areas, the only food that had been available in the community was the processed food of convenience marts and fast food outlets. Now, Justin and Rashaun Clark are serving up Chickpea Tacos and Sweet Potato parfaits to a diverse clientele that have sparked the beginning of a transformation for the area. Justin says there was nothing else healthy around here. He says. “I felt like there was a real need around here for healthy food. There’s a real need in this neighborhood for more than food, to be honest.” “It needs love,” Rashaun says. “Needs love.”

In a similar way, a determined neighborhood organization partnered with the city to bring in a new grocery store, making fresh food a possibility in the neighborhood. Other businesses are opening up, diversity is evident and growing, and I even saw an ad for a community festival called *Troosta Palooza*.

What idols do you need to bury to live into the promise of a place?  
Jesus said you cannot serve both God and mammon. Joshua challenged  
the people in a new land to serve the Lord in sincerity and faithfulness.  
The promise of place is in the work God accomplishes through you.  
Amen.