

## The Signs are all Around Us

We have all heard the question, “why can’t people learn from history?” In his way, that is what Joshua is asking the tribes of Israel gathered on holy ground at Shechem today. Can we take a lesson from our own history? Today we have come together where the ground has become holy by the generations worshiping here before us.

Earlier in the book of Joshua we learn that Yahweh has designated Shechem as a place of refuge in the midst of war-torn lands. I imagine the border of Turkey near Syria has become such a place today. Even our little church here in the village becomes refuge. Maybe not because of the actual wars around us, but here we may find shelter for our souls and minds.

We all are drawn to *this* sacred ground for our own reasons – maybe it’s tradition or spiritual need or to find meaning. We are at Shechem, in a sense. We hear Joshua’s ancient call to “serve the Lord your God”, reminding us to think of our history of God’s leading. Look deep in your hearts. Can we serve God and not all the other gods around us?

We live in times when gods take other, more insidious shapes. “... as St. Augustine put it, "Love God and do what you want." That is, if you love God, you will want to live for God and follow God's ways. Few of us are tempted by any gods of other nations or any gods with other names, but as Luther made clear in his explanation of the First Commandment, anything one fears, loves, and trusts above everything else—whether that is riches, self, prestige, or whatever—is one's God. We all serve many gods.” (Ralph Klein)

The challenge is before us: Choose whom you serve this day. Serving God may mean worshiping God, but more importantly it means placing our loyalty with God. How do we know God is active in our lives and in our world? The signs are all around us.

When I was in college, one biology course helped me see signs of God’s handiwork. I had been wrestling, as all of us do, with whether God existed or was a figment of human construct. That day, we were examining plant seeds under the light microscopes. The incredible symmetry and balance I saw there was a revelation. Science taught about life rising from the primordial ooze on the planet. In that seed – a representative of one of the most ancient trees on the planet – I saw design and creativity that couldn’t have just “happened”. Whomever, whatever God is had to have a hand in it.

The signs *are* all around us. Our land, our produce, our abilities do not exist because of us. We may plant our gardens, weeding, watering and fertilizing, but it is because of God we have growing things to enjoy. We may build and invent and dream, but it is because of God that we have incisive and creative minds to work with. Have you ever wondered why you had a talent or two that other people do not? What is that talent? One of mine is to hear a piece of music just once or twice and know it. I always thought other people could do that as well until I started

picking hymns I knew and found out others didn't know them. I thought they were familiar to everybody...and found out the hard way!

How do we know God is active in our lives? How do we make the choice whom to serve? Talitha Arnold, a pastor who once served the same church in Middletown, recalls some good advice she received. At a lecture given by Martin Marty, she asked, "What advice do you have for a United Church of Christ pastor serving a church that isn't sure it wants to be a Christian church in the New Age capital of Santa Fe?"

"The United Church of Christ?" he asked. "You have the blood of the Puritans in you! Claim your inheritance." But then he said, "If you go deep enough into any faith tradition, you find the common ground with all other traditions. That's why a Baptist preacher like Martin Luther King could learn from Gandhi the Hindu, or why a Capuchin like Thomas Merton was in conversation with Buddhist monks."

"I think that's what all of us are seeking," he continued. "We want that common ground. But we have to go deep into our own tradition to find it. (Talitha Arnold)

The signs of God at work throughout history come to us from Joshua and thousands of others in the holy scriptures. Joshua's people had to look deep into their own experience to recognize and say, "God is our God." The signs of God at work in this place come to us from those who built a sanctuary and refuge here in this place. The Pilgrims and Puritans came to this land with the bold statement, "God is our God."

Look within. What is your story? Is God's presence in the pages and chapters like it was in that miraculous seed under the microscope? Israel's story, the Pilgrims' story, this church's story all claim "God is our God." What is our story? Can we see the signs all around us and choose whom to serve? I will serve the Lord.

Talitha Arnold, "True Grit", *The Christian Century*, October 23-November 5, p. 18.

November 09, 2008 at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) - Ralph W. Klein, Christ Seminary-Seminex professor of Old Testament, emeritus; Lutheran School of Theology; Chicago, IL