

THE LORD CRUSHES IDOLS AT SHECHEM. It may not look like much. In fact, all that the city of Shechem is reduced to is a little more than a pile of stones in a town called Balata in the West Bank in current day Palestine. It's surrounded by high rise apartments, banks, schools, and car dealerships, there's even a gym on Mount Gerizim just to the south. People in Palestine drive past this pile of rubble as well as shrines set up to Jacob's well and the patriarch Joseph's tomb.

You and I won't be visiting Shechem any time soon. Palestine is a war-torn country as Israel and Palestine continue to fight. Sadly, there are plenty of piles of rubble in that part of the world and the news tells us of the latest civilian casualties and the thousands of refugees fleeing the violence in that part of the world. One thing this conflict tells us is that location matters. Neither the Jews nor the Muslims are simply going to pack up their bags and start a new country somewhere else.

Perhaps that's why Joshua assembled the people at Shechem in our Old Testament text. Joshua said to the people who had just conquered the promised land. **“Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”**

THE LORD CRUSHES IDOLS AT SHECHEM. Joshua does a review of Israel's history as he gathers the people at Shechem that fateful day. It all starts 700 years before Joshua with the Lord calling Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to go west to the land of Canaan. That would be about the same distance as if I told someone in the Wisconsin Dells to walk all the way to the White House.

Abraham left all that he knew: his people, his gods, and his land, with just a promise from the Lord: I will make you a great nation. The first landmark he sees on his journey is the oak tree at Shechem. There the Lord appears to Abraham and promises **“To your offspring I will give this land.”** This was even before Abraham had any children. What an amazing promise!

Could Abraham have imagined the thousands of Israelites that would gather in that place seven hundred years later? All of whom were his offspring. All of whom followed the same God who called him out

of Ur. Can you think of the promises Jesus has made to you? How have those promises changed your life?

Abraham’s arrival in the promised land marked a new era. As the Lord called Abraham and made him the promise to give the land to his offspring it was as if God was saying to him, **“Now therefore fear [Me] and serve [Me] in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve [Me].”**

THE LORD CRUSHES IDOLS AT SHECHEM. Jacob was the name of Abraham’s grandson. Eventually he and his family would move down to Egypt. However, before that, the Lord called Jacob to meet Him at Bethel. Bethel is Hebrew for the house of God.

“So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.””

This command to put away the idols is the same word Joshua uses with the people of Israel. Jacob and his household bury their foreign gods under the tree at Shechem, leaving them behind. As Jacob goes to Bethel, he encounters God. The Lord blesses Jacob, gives him the name Israel, and promises that He will give the land to Israel’s offspring.

In baptism, the Lord blesses you as well. He gives you a new name as you are marked in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He buries your idols and your sins at the foot of the tree of the cross, and He takes you to Bethel, namely, the house of God wherein you live with the Lord forever.

False gods are so prominent and easily lure us away from the true God. Yet we take to heart Jacob’s word to his family as well as Joshua’s word to the people of Israel: **“Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”**

THE LORD CRUSHES IDOLS AT SHECHEM. Place matters, and that’s why Joshua summoned the people of Israel to Shechem. There

was so much hope and joy in the air as God’s people had finally returned home after over 475 years of being gone from the land of Canaan.

The people would have remembered all that had happened at Shechem: how the Lord brought Abraham there, how Jacob had put away his idols. They knew that this was something momentous. They knew this was a turning point.

Christian baptism is how we live our life. We live a life of turning from sin and asking the Lord to forgive us where we fall short. The Israelites started out with good intentions, but they would often fall back into their foreign gods and false cures. We return to our baptism when we continually put away those false gods which seem to keep coming back up out of the ground like zombies.

It is through the power of the Holy Spirit alone that we, like the Israelites could heed Joshua’s call: **“Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”**

THE LORD CRUSHES IDOLS AT SHECHEM. The Lord sent a second Joshua to Shechem. The second Joshua that the Lord sent is Jesus whose name is the Greek equivalent of the name Joshua.

When Jesus flees his enemies, He and his disciples fled through the region of Samaria and went to the town of Sychar. It is very likely that this town was close to the ancient place of Shechem. There Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well. He has a conversation with her and calls her away from a life of sin to a way of life following Him.

You see, the Samaritan people were an ugly reminder to the Jews of that time that they were unable to keep the promises their ancestors made back in Joshua 24. Long story short, the Samaritans were Jews who mixed in with the nations, both ethnically and religiously. You see, place matters, and to a Jew of Jesus’ time, Shechem was a place a Jew would rather just forget because it signified a long line of broken promises, a long habit of Israelites choosing false gods instead of the true one.

That day, Jesus worked to crush idols at Shechem as He approached the Samaritan woman, and He is working to crush your idols. Your history doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter how ashamed you

might be over glorious promises you made but fear you haven't kept. He offers forgiveness of sins. He offers peace. He offers a fresh start—not under the tree at Shechem, but under the tree of Calvary, as He invites you remember your baptism and die to sin with Him that you may be raised to life just as He rose on the third day.

Place matters, and the Lord is calling you to the places where He promises to be. He is calling you to places where Christians gather such as this congregation and those like it wherein He uses Word and Sacrament to crush our idols. In their place He replaces it with true hope, true peace, and true forgiveness. Strengthened by Him, we can heartily answer: **“as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”**

THE LORD CRUSHES IDOLS AT SHECHEM. It wasn't Shechem exactly, but it did feel like we were in a different century as we drove past Mennonites with horse drawn wagons.

Place matters and we drove an hour north so a faithful member could be laid to rest alongside friends and family who already died to be with Jesus. As we gathered, a nephew told me the story of some of the names whose headstones dotted the cemetery. Each of these a person with a story, perhaps a story only the Lord knew.

After the graveside service, the vicar asked me idly at the graveside, “What would you want written on your tombstone?” You have been baptized into Christ; your false gods have been buried at the foot of the cross. You have been forgiven, and one day your body will be laid to rest awaiting the resurrection of all flesh with nothing more than a gravestone with names, date, and perhaps a brief epitaph carved in stone. Joshua is calling out to us from Shechem inviting us to live a life of faithfulness worthy of a story in a particular time in history in a particular place here on earth. Place matters.

After the burial, the vicar asked me idly at the graveside, “What would you want written on your tombstone?” To which I answered, “Huh?” He said, “Look at the back of the gravestone.” Sure enough, on the back of the gravestone this Bible verse was written, **“as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”** Amen.