



“Choose Life”

Scripture – Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, February 16, 2020

I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity ... Choose life. Choose life.

This is Moses’ farewell address. After forty years of ministry, this is the message Moses chooses to impress upon the people of Israel — the message he hopes will guide this community as they cross the River Jordan and carve out a life in the Promised Land.

Moses could have gone all nostalgic on them. He could have gotten sentimental — even a bit self-indulgent — rehashing the highlights of the last forty years:

He could have told the now-infamous story of God calling to him from that bush on Mount Horeb. It would have been one last chance to set the record straight: No — he had *not* been filled with new wine when he stumbled upon the burning bush; yes — the shrub really had survived the ordeal; no — there were no talking sheep! Ugh — the tale really had taken on a life of its own after too many tellings ‘round the campfire.

Moses could have rehearsed the community’s miraculous escape from Egypt: Their surprise as they watched the Red Sea waves part to form walls on their right and on their left; their relief as they realized God had routed Pharaoh’s army of chariots; their exuberance as they tasted freedom for the first time. Oh, the party they’d had on the shores of the Red Sea! Moses could have recalled the many times they’d witnessed wonders in the wilderness: Manna that blanketed the ground like dew in the desert; water gushing from the rock; God coming to Moses on Mount Sinai to deliver the Law – Ten Commandments that revealed the very heart of God.

Moses could have filled page after page with memories and maxims; he could have crafted a speech that laid out the legacy of his leadership. Instead, Moses uses his farewell address to look ahead; he looks to the future his family and friends will shape without him. Moses has been told that he will *not* cross over into the Promised Land. So, now — as Israel treads the verge of Jordan — this Forefather of the Faith faces his final chance to give guidance to the people he’s shepherded for forty years. In this moment, the essence of Moses’ hopes and fears for this covenant community boil down to two words: Choose life. Choose life.

It seems like such an obvious statement. I can imagine all the teenagers in that crowd of Israelites muttering under their breath: “Well, duh.” When faced with a choice between life and death, anyone who is not enduring unspeakable suffering would surely choose life. Surely. But Moses’ charge is not, simply, to exist. Or to subsist. “To be or not to be.” As far as Moses is concerned, that is *not* the question. No, Moses is exhorting the people of

God to claim the life God has set before them — the life that can and will be if only they walk in right paths. *If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God ... by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live*, Moses says. It sounds to our ears like a dramatic dose of hyperbole. ‘Come on, Moses; keeping God’s commandments is not really a matter of life and death!’ But, in all honesty, we choose between life and death every single day:

When we blame others for mistakes and mishaps, that is a choice for death. When we offer a sincere apology, that is a choice for life. When we deny ourselves rest and renewal because we still have laundry to fold and emails to answer and obligatory functions to attend, we are choosing death. When we declare that the To-Do list is *not* Lord of our lives and carve out time for Sabbath, we are choosing life.

When we accept incivility in our public discourse and give ourselves over to cynicism, we’re dying. When we hold ourselves and our leaders to a nobler standard and respond out of our hope for the future, then we’re living.

Resentment — that’s death. Forgiveness — that’s life. Sowing discord — death-dealing. Building relationships across differences — harvesting life. Consuming and consuming and consuming some more — death. Taking only what we need and sharing what we have — life. When we ignore the plight of neighbors in need — well, that’s death. When we help out at the soup kitchen or mentor a child or advocate for peace in the Middle East, that’s life.

I dare say we have all felt pulled into the tug of war between Death and Life. And, for this reason, we know that Moses’ charge to choose life is more complicated than it initially sounds. The choice he sets before us is a choice between destructive habits that eat away at our souls and nurturing practices that draw us closer to God, a choice between careless habits that tear away at our common life and care-filled practices that draw us into life-giving community. Moses is calling the covenant people to embrace a different way of being in this world: a way of being that serves God and furthers God’s vision for creation.

This is not a new concept for the Hebrew people — the tension between two opposing ways of being in the world. In a way, resolving this conflict is the very reason God calls Moses to ministry in the first place. When the Lord speaks to Moses from that burning bush on Mount Horeb, God says: *I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt so that they may worship me* (Exod 3:7-12; 9:1 paraphrase). I will send you to bring my people out of Egypt so that they may worship me.

The thing we lose when we read this story in English is that the Hebrew word for ‘worship’ is the same word that describes the Israelites’ forced labor in Egypt. The exact same word ... which adds nuance to our understanding: God delivers the Hebrews from one sovereign to another — from service to Pharaoh to service to God, from lives abused by systems of death to lives in service to the source, and way, of life. So now, forty years after their Exodus from Egypt, the covenant community has — finally — reached the edge of the Promised Land. They stand on the banks of the Jordan, looking out over the land they will call ‘home’ and ahead to the future God has set before for them. This is their opportunity to embrace a way of being that serves God and embodies God’s vision for creation. They need only choose. And the one who led them out of Egypt is urging them to commit to a life of service to God: *Choose life*, Moses says. Choose life.

The Hebrew people know what this life entails; Moses has already spelled it out for them. We need only read through Deuteronomy to grasp the specifics. This book is full of commandments that govern right living:

If there is anyone in need among you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted, but open your hand to meet your neighbor’s need (Deut 15:7-8, paraphrase).

When you reap your harvest or gather your grapes do not strip your field or vineyard bare, but leave a remnant for the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow (Deut 24:19-22, paraphrase).

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy; six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall not work — you, or your children, or your servants, or livestock, or anyone who resides in your town; *everyone* deserves rest (Deut 5:12-14, paraphrase).

And, most of all, this — the Greatest Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deut 6:5).

If this all sounds familiar, that's because you've likely committed a paraphrase of Deuteronomy to memory. Jesus, the One who came — as we heard last week — to *fulfill* the law and the prophets, put it this way: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matt 22:37-39).

This is what life lived in service to God looks like. It is a different way of being in the world — a way of being marked by generosity and grace, by compassion and care. It is a way of being that rejects habits that deny our full humanity — a way of being that strips systems of death of their power over us. It is a way of being that proclaims that we belong to one another and to the Lord of Love. Simply put, it is a way of being that leads to life.

I know this to be true, because I've seen it. I've seen how the choice to love both God and neighbor fully leads to life ... to *abundant* life. Let me tell you about someone I got to know through my ministry at Wayne Presbyterian Church. We'll call him John. When I met John, he'd been a member of Wayne for thirteen years. But — as he'd be the first to tell you — he hadn't really been active for ten. John hadn't found something to invest in; he hadn't found a way to give his whole self in service to God. But, as John neared retirement and prepared to leave a successful and busy career, he decided he needed to move toward something else. So he sat down with the pastors at Wayne to see where he might be able to use his gifts. They steered him towards a ministry in Southwest Philadelphia that needed help with computers and could use his technical expertise. It seemed like a good project — something to fill his days.

But, it quickly became more than a project. It was the community that did it — the people at this ministry embraced John, and shared with him their love for God, and for their neighborhood. He wanted to be part of that. He began to get connected to more and more ministries in Southwest Philadelphia — getting to know men at the homeless shelter, and teachers at the schools. When we founded an after school program, John was the first to volunteer — coming three days a week to tutor children. As the school year unfolded, it quickly became apparent how much students in that after school program loved Mr. John. They would wait at their tables, watching for him to arrive. And when he appeared at the door, they'd run up and greet him with a hug, and pull him over to their seats so he could help them with their homework.

It became clear to those of us who watched John tutoring those kids that something big was happening here. Something bigger than conquered math problems and completed reading assignments. Something bigger than laughter resounding from tables where worksheets were being packed away to make room for board games or art supplies. Something bigger, even, than under-served and under-valued children finding mentors who cared for them. ... Yes, something big was happening here: *Life* was happening here. In that room, where members of the covenant community were doing their best to love God and neighbor, abundant life was blossoming. This is what life lived in service to God looks like. It is a way of being that affirms that we belong to one another — whether you're a businessman with a successful career behind you, or a child yearning for a brighter future. It's a way of being where fulfillment is found in service, and wholeness is realized within community. It is a way of being that leads to life.

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Prayers of the People ~ Chesna Hinkley

Almighty and merciful God, who holds each one of us in the palm of your hand, we give you thanks and praise for your undying faithfulness to your people in every age and every place. All we have and all we are belongs to you, you who chose in self-sufficient freedom to speak all life and truth and love into existence. For mighty displays of rescuing glory, and for your humble work among us as one unknown, sustaining us by secret mercy, we praise you. Your grace, o Lord, is sufficient for us, there is power in your name, there is healing in your love. We bring to you all that we are today, what we show and what we keep hidden, what we love and what we hate, what we know and what we wonder, wounds we have received and wounds we have inflicted, we offer all these things to you, the lover of our souls, the lifter of our heads. Be near to us.

We ask that you would inspire the whole church with your Holy Spirit's power, unity, and peace. Grant that we would trust in you, that we would obey the witness to your Word in Scripture, that we would live together in joy, and that in your church, the good news of Jesus Christ would reach the ends of the earth.

We pray for our nation, for our president, our legislators, our judges. Lord may we not place our hope in parties or candidates, but in the one true King of all things seen and unseen, our Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you that in your holy wisdom you are not far from each one of us, and may our leaders and all global leaders seek and find.

We lift up those among us looking for work, struggling for money, or at risk of losing a job. You promise to give us what we need, and we ask that you would bolster our trust. Open our eyes and ears to those for whom we may be the help you send.

In this season of preparation, we pray for students and parents waiting to hear back about applications, studying for exams, and making plans. Prosper their work, help them to trust in you, and make each step forward clear in your perfect time.

God, we pray today for those in our congregation who have lost love or who feel it slipping away. We know your power to reconcile and to rescue, and we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit that you would meet each person in the unique way that they need.

For all those who grieve, whose bodies hurt, who are depressed, who are lonely, who are addicted, who are sick, who are dying, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For days and years and decades when you seem far off or even absent, Father, sustain us. The darkness is deep, but it has not overcome the true Light, and so we ask that in your mercy you would allow us glimpses of hope in despair, peace in turmoil, joy in sorrow. In times of mourning, God, give us grace to be a community of solidarity, a family of holy lament. Let us not be a people of pretended happiness, but of true and abiding joy in the one who called us friends, who wept with us and for us and as one of us. Lead us to carry one another in sorrow and in doubt, remembering always that in every act of service it is you we care for.

For the mercies we will not know about until the end, Lord, we give you our heartfelt thanks and praise. As we cast our cares on you, guide us always to glorify the name that is above every name, the name of your Son, 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.