

February 12

What Would You Choose?

Deuteronomy 30;15-20

Moses has been leading the people of Israel for almost forty years. During that time he had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, given them the Ten Commandments from God, and helped them to understand what it meant to be a people of faith. The miracles of God had been many, reminding the people God was with them. It began with the plagues in Egypt that secured their freedom, to crossing the Red Sea, manna each morning, water in the desert, a pillar of smoke or fire and more. Now it was time for Moses to turn over the leadership to another. The scripture we read this morning is part of his farewell address. After this, he will leave them to climb Mount Nebo alone to see the Promised Land before he dies. They, now a nation, will move forward to claim their inheritance.

When the people had first received the Ten Commandments they had accepted them and covenanted to follow them. Now he was asking them to renew their covenant. There was a reason for this. Just before this pleading to choose life he had told them they needed to return to the Lord! Even with all the reminders that God is with them they had wandered off into idolatry.

We hear this challenge: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" and think, don't we wish it were this easy? Choose correctly and you get blessings. Bad choices and you know what you get. But life is a little messier than this. If things were this simple they would not have needed covenant renewal services. No one would choose death willingly if they had the option to choose life. But this is exactly what we do.

The people of Israel went after false idols. Idolatry manifests itself in many ways throughout the Old Testament: the worship of idols or images of Yahweh their God, as what happened when they created a golden calf, or the worship of other deities, such as Baal, portrayed by actual idols. Prophets like Micah and Amos also describe the ways that worship practices themselves have become idols, while other requirements of the

law like justice and righteousness have been ignored. All of these are ways they choose things that deaden life and faith.

Idolatry also manifests itself in multiple ways today. Even though we may give intellectual assent to the worship of the one true God, our practices suggest other loyalties. We make idols out of political ideologies; we chase after shiny new consumer goods; and we spend hours of every day watching television or the computer accepting what we see as truth. Even within the church, we may act as if church buildings, particular theological tenets, or keeping the “right people” in or out is more important than the worship of God alone.

The result of these idolatrous practices is we are not choosing life. If we serve wealth instead of God, the poor suffer. If we serve consumption instead of God, the environment suffers. If we serve pride or fear instead of God, both we and our neighbors suffer. Service of God alone must be the beacon that guides our journey through daily life, or else we face both spiritual and physical death.

Are there places you knowingly or unknowingly choose death instead of life? We think, I would never do that! Yet I have seen where this is exactly what people were doing. Let me give you a few examples A person comes to see me. They are really upset at something their sibling has done and I agree it is really hurtful. When they ask me, “What should I do?” I sometimes respond, “Jesus says that the first response should be to forgive them. Letting go of the anger you have is a good first step to figuring out a way to heal this rift between you.” I don’t know how many times I have heard, “You don’t understand” and then they go through the whole list again of the misdeeds of the other. Or they say, “I’ll forgive them when..” and then place so many conditions on the forgiveness that it isn’t realistic. They often leave angry with me because I have refused to join their anger and pity party. I see the results of unresolved disagreements when families gather to bury a parent and the siblings won’t talk to one another. And just a reminder here, forgiving someone doesn’t mean that you may still need to hold them accountable for their actions. What it is saying is that I choose life, and walking around with a pile of anger isn’t life giving.

I have sat in church meetings where congregations have chosen a path that deadens life and faith. You think, no church would do that. Yet one time we had a request, not here, to host some girl scouts. For me this seemed an easy request to grant. We had the space and having young people in the church was, to me, a good thing. Imagine my surprise when the trustees started talking about carpet wear, janitorial supplies used and the inconvenience of not having the church space when we might want it. A couple of us tried to help them see the bigger picture but to no avail. It was brought up again at the Ad Council which decided to side with the trustees. Two families had girls in that troop and I noticed some time later that they were not very active in the church any more. Did that church choose life or preservation? Did it position itself to be welcoming to all or seen as exclusive? Had the church building become an idol?

Reading these six verses in isolation might give the impression that this is a one-time choice for the Israelites. But we have the good fortune of knowing how the story continues. To “choose life” in this moment does not mean to have accomplished anything or to have finished anything. Choosing life means starting something: living in a messy, difficult, and holy relationship with God. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites stray from the covenant, only to find God continually willing to embrace the people again, even if they also experience God’s judgment. Centuries of prophets will stand in the tradition of Moses, helping the people see that the consequences of idolatry are deadly, but that striving to live in relationship with God yields life. Covenant fidelity is not accomplished or thwarted simply through intellectual commitment or vocal assent. Covenant fidelity is a set of lived practices, an ongoing orientation toward love of God and neighbor. Moses is not asking the people simply to check off the correct box; Moses is asking them to turn their whole lives toward God.

That day in the desert the people were asked to choose life. We celebrate that they did just that but there are also many covenant renewal services. They need to keep being reminded. We too are asked to choose life but we too need to be reminded that we let other priorities take first place in our lives, that we let our own desires trump the life God would have us embrace. So we too need to be reminded to keep the covenant, to choose life. I believe that worship might be such an act. It should be seen as a time

each week where we are reminded to choose life. This is part of why I say that you can't be a person of faith without going to church. You might believe and you might be a good person but faith is more. It is a time to gather in community to support one another. It is a time to gather and be reminded of what it means to be faithful. Because we, like the Israelites, might at times stray. Worship is a time for us to evaluate how we are doing. We are comforted in the fact that God's love embraces us and wants the best for us. Each time we worship we too are called to choose life.

In closing let me share two stories of how worship can act in that way. There was a man in one of my congregations whose wife was dealing with the Alzheimer's disease. He always made it a point for one of their children or a caretaker or a friend to be with her on Sunday mornings so he could come to church. In visiting with him one time he shared with me why it was so important for him to be there. He said, "Church reminds me that I am not going through this alone. People cared about me, God cares about me. In worship I find the peace and strength I need to face another week." Worship for him was a time to reflect, to see his life within the bigger picture of living and let go of some of his frustrations and find solace. This is choosing life.

Another person shares with me that church is the time that they can give all the mistakes they have made during the week to God, figure out how to do better and leave renewed. That is covenant renewal.

So this day ask for forgiveness for where you have chased after idols. Ask for forgiveness for when you have not heeded the words of life. And then in faith hear that you are forgiven, you can try again and go forth this day choosing life.