



A Chosen Life

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

A sermon by William M. Klein

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15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. **16** If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. **17** But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, **18** I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. **19** I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, **20** loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 30:15-20 NRSV)

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“Choose life,” said Moses to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. “Choose life.”

You might ask, “Who wouldn’t?” Given the choice, wouldn’t everyone choose life?

Well, you would think so...but making choices is rarely clear-cut, is it? Oh, sure, there are some clearly black and white choices...but generally it is much more complicated.

Tragically instead of choosing life some people choose literal, physical death. It is a choice that leaves deep, deep scars in the lives of the families and friends left behind.

More commonly, though, we tend to make less drastic but nonetheless poor choices that pay no attention to good judgment. This happens in the ballot box with perplexing regularity. Our diet, the amount of exercise and sleep we get, the crowd we run with...in all these things we too often make choices that suggest we do not “choose life.”

And it is not as if we do not know we are choosing poorly. Our natural impulse is to choose life. Some people think it is more natural for us to botch things. But both biological instinct and the biblical witness suggest our natural impulse is to choose life. We were made by God, for God, like God.¹ Planted in the center of our being is a longing for the holy, which means our natural impulse is to choose the good...to choose life.² So when we ignore that impulse we pay...don’t we? Often we pay dearly.

For example, when we tell a lie we think we have gotten away with something. But the lie that gets us out of trouble in the moment often plagues us for hours or days or even years to come.³

My parents told me the same thing your parents told you - “Tell the truth; it may be painful but it’s a lot simpler. That way you will not have to worry about trying to keep up with the lies.”

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“Choose life,” Moses said to the Israelites. They had spent 210 years as slaves in Egypt and then 40 years traveling in the wilderness. Now they were poised on the banks of the Jordan River finally ready to enter the land Moses had been talking about – the precious Promised Land.

Moses knew he would not be going there with them...but that is another story. Our lesson from Deuteronomy is his farewell speech to the Israelites. In a matter of days they would be on their own. He would not be making decisions for them or running interference for them any more. He had led them from Egypt and slavery to the Promised Land and freedom. He had dealt with their griping and complaining and had taught them everything he knew about God, about God's love for them, and about being God's people. From the moment they crossed over into Canaan and left Moses behind, though, they must be able to stand on their own two feet.

After a fashion I understand Moses' predicament...for as a parent I know, that while I hope to be around a good many more years, I cannot accompany my children into their future. Part of my job as their father was to help them reach a point where they could be set free. I had to “give them wings,” as the old saying goes. But a worry always nagged at the back of my mind – had I taught them all they needed to know in order to thrive and succeed and be happy, healthy, faithful, and well adjusted? Were there life-lessons I had not put into their toolbox of knowledge? When the time came for them to set forth for untold adventures without my guidance, had I done my job well enough? Had I served them and God well enough? The same sort of questions plague me as your pastor.

As a sort of pep-talk, Moses appealed to the best in the Israelites, hoping to awaken “that of God” within them inclined toward choosing well, toward choosing as God knew they could choose, toward choosing life. He knew that if they choose well they might live well and become numerous and know the delight of God's blessing. What is more, Moses wanted their lives in the Promised Land to be examples to everyone living there of what it looks like when people choose life.

A good question of the text would be – when Moses asked the Israelites to choose *life*, what was he urging them to choose?

Well, Moses tells us. Life – full, happy, free life – is what happens when you love the Lord God, walk in his ways, and obey his commandments. Many years later Jesus said choosing life is what happens when you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, and soul...and your neighbor as yourself.⁴ Many more years later St. Augustine suggested we choose life when we realize we were made for God and that God is the ultimate answer to that restlessness deep in our soul.

As I see it, Moses and Jesus and Augustine wanted us to realize that a certain kind of existential restlessness is “standard-issue.” It is not a flaw in our make-up...not something we would want a surgeon or a psychiatrist or an exorcist to remove. Restlessness is planted there for a very good purpose...and that purpose is to help orient us...to aim us at God.

Sometimes we come so very close to “reading” God's gift of restlessness right and to actually choosing life...so close. Sometimes we are 95% there...but we are afraid of

taking the last step. So often we are like the guy who stands looking into the open refrigerator at three o'clock in the morning knowing he is hungry for something but not knowing what it is he needs. So he stuffs his mouth with something he knows deep inside will not satisfy.

We stand around feeling a vague kind of restlessness...and we have no idea of what it is that we actually need. So we stuff ourselves with things - with gadgets, gizmos, and experiences rather than with God - and emerge at the other end of our feeding frenzy very aware that what we have is not what we need at all.⁵

We may have tried everything we know to convince ourselves the restlessness has nothing to do with God or with our innate purpose...but we know, don't we? We know the restless feeling is pointing us to God. And we know the only real answer to the restlessness is God. We are 95% there...but we are afraid to take that last step because we are not sure who we will be if we take that step...if we lay aside our familiar (though fruitless) habits and dare to trust God.

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Can you and I make this choice? Can we choose life?

With toes wading in the water of the Jordan, the people of Israel were as eager as we are to press on into their new home. But Moses wasn't through with them...not quite yet. Dropping to his aged, wobbly knees, he urged, pleaded, and begged his people to take seriously the choice before them.

"Choose life," he implored. "Choose life by loving the God who passionately loves you. Love God with your whole heart, and mind, and strength. Choose life by choosing the life God is setting before you...for if you choose this life you will know the marvelous peace of God."

Moses was not just speaking to those Israelites, was he?



Lexington Presbyterian Church
120 South Main Street
Lexington, Virginia 24450
www.lexpres.org

Endnotes:

¹ Tutu, Desmond M. & Tutu, Mpho A. 2011. Made for Goodness And Why This Makes All the Difference. NY: HarperCollins e-books, Loc. 157-168.

² Tutu, Loc. 192-193.

³ Tutu, Loc. 883-887.

⁴ See Matthew 22:37-39.

⁵ Tutu, Loc. 201-206.