

Choose Life¹
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Two summers ago at a Star Island Youth Conference we Youth Leaders gave the youth an assignment. We asked them to write their obituaries...twice. One obituary would reflect a worst case scenario for their lives—what if they were just cursed; what if their fears got the last word in their lives; what if nothing—just *nothing*—went right; what would that sort of life look like if you looked back on it? The other obituary was a best case scenario—what if all their dreams worked out, and their hopes got the last word, and their whole lives were simply blessed; how would that obituary read?

Now, it is a forced choice exercise. There can only be all bad or all good—and life doesn't really work like that. There is a lot more of the in-between stuff that comes our way in actual experience. But the purpose of the exercise was to encourage the youth to consider what they might do to steer their lives toward blessings and away from curses. Are their particular choices which will predictably direct them one way or the other? What might those be? Are their certain daily and weekly activities that will steer them toward blessings or curses? What might those look like? Perhaps most importantly, how do our choices affect our relationships with other people and with God?

Just as Moses is about to die, and the people of Israel are going to enter the Holy Land, Moses lays out a worst case scenario and a best case scenario for the relationship between God and the Israelites. But before he does so, he reminds the Israelites of their shared story and time together. He reminds them about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and of Jacob who became Israel. He reminds the people of how God saved them all from Egypt. He retells their long journey through the wilderness. He reviews the Ten Commandments and all the decrees and ordinances that go along with them. And then—twenty six or so chapters later—he gets to those scenarios: the people of Israel are facing a choice; a choice between life or death, blessings or curses, a life with God *as God's people*, or aimless lives without God.

No pressure...thanks Moses! This passage makes it sound like things will *always* turn up buttercups and roses if we follow God and choose life. But we all know better. We all have known people who always do right and yet know no end of hardships in their lives. Maybe we

¹ Many thanks to the perspectives of W. Sibley Towner, and Brett Younger in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Westminster John Knox Press: Kentucky, USA, 2010).

have been there, too. We all have known people who connive and backstab and get richer and richer for it. Sometimes good things happen to bad people, and sometimes simply horrible things happen to perfectly wonderful people. Sometimes we choose life with conviction, we resolutely stand with God, and the bad stuff squarely hits the fan anyhow.

So, did Moses lie? Do the choices we make really matter? Or is life going to dish up something random whether or not we choose life and God? Now, as a pastor I am at least a little biased toward encouraging people to listen to Moses, or Jesus, or God. It is kind of an occupational hazard. Plus it has worked out pretty well for me. I have basically bet everything on God. I am clothed, fed and raising a family I love dearly thanks to choosing a life of following God. But I have not had a life which has been completely free from pain or struggle either. I have lost friends and family members. I have wrestled with my own demons, and will continue to do so. I have known pain that has woken me at midnight, and shaken me to my core. Also, I have not become, nor do I expect to become, a materially rich man. My life has been a mixed bag, which I suspect is true for all of us. Most of us live lives composed of the in-between stuff and punctuated by moments, or seasons, of blessing and moments, or seasons, of curses, whether we orient our lives toward God in love, or not.

Yet, I do truly believe that when we open our hearts to following God, something qualitative changes in our lives. We become spiritually rich even if we miss out on the big bucks. Fundamentally we become more alive to the life we are living—more awake. In no small part because in opening ourselves up to God, we also open ourselves up to other people. Moses mentions this only in passing in this morning’s reading, but he had covered it in depth throughout the other twenty something chapters of his farewell. His shorthand for it in our portion is “loving the Lord... *walking in his ways*, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances.”² And what Moses means by that is exactly what every Biblical prophet talks about, not least our brother Jesus. He means treating other people well, and honoring their commitments to their families and to God. He means keeping God in the middle of our life, not off to the side or forgotten somewhere. He means keeping God with us in our waking and our sleeping, our work and our eating, our whole lives. He means caring for the poor, and orphans and widows. In short, he means doing our part to ensure that the world runs as God designed it to. Following God, or choosing life, means doing our parts to invite God more deeply into the world and more deeply into our hearts.

And when we do those things; when we walk the talk of the prophets, we receive the rewards of virtue. Through good behavior we actually improve our own spiritual and physical health. And that can snowball. Our examples can effect others, who effect others, who effect others...and so

² Deuteronomy 30:16b.

on into the world. Goodness *can be* contagious. But we need to be intentional about it. We cannot be passively good, or passively in relationship with God and others. It takes work. It takes certain practices. It takes commitment.

So, in his farewell address, Moses asks for a commitment from his people. And here is where God's grace steps in. The people never firmly commit. In fact, they make no response at all. And that means that the offer remains open. We never answer, but God never revokes the offer of life, either. God knows well that human beings are weak, just as surely as we are wonderful. We *do* make mistakes. We falter often. So, God's offer to choose life cannot be a passing one time only chance. It must be a perennial one. God leaves the offer of life open, because God knows we will need it again and again. God knows we will sometimes, and perhaps often, fall and fail, but rise to try again if we are offered the chance. So, God leaves the chance open. And not only that, but God offers us the opportunity for life in an increasing array of possible ways.

Because death is always on offer throughout the world, and in our culture especially. Death is not an end only. Death is not merely the final hurdle between the struggles of this life and the eternal embrace of our loving God. Like life, it is not a one-time only offer. Indeed, as Biblical interpreter Brett Younger says: "Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter,"³ and those things surely erode our souls—some sooner and some later, but all surely. When we spend all of our spare money on distractions like bad movies, fast food or other unnecessary material things rather than our local church or social programs, then we die a little. When we immerse ourselves only in fads and pop culture at the expense of exploring the great works of human kind, then we die a little. There are a thousand ways to die before the end of our life. When we support a tax break for the rich, yet also cut funding to a local food pantry we die a little. When we turn away from someone we love, we die a little. When we turn our back on God, and treat another cruelly, we die a little. Every time we draw a line between ourselves and others, we die a little.

And every time we cross a line like that, our loving God says—"No! Don't die; live! Choose life, not death! Choose to walk with me, not in alienation. Come to be with me, don't choose to be alone. Come join others in my Holy family—don't stand outside of the circle of grace, *it is open to you!* I know you will falter sometimes. I know you will fall sometimes. But here is what I am saying to you, *now and always*—choose life! Choose me! Choose a holy relationship between you, me and your fellow humans!"

³ Brett Younger, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Westminster John Knox Press: Kentucky, USA, 2010), p.341.

That is what is on offer in this scripture passage, and always. Don't be afraid, friends this is not a forced choice, this is not a one-time only choice, we cannot miss this boat, because it is an ongoing opportunity to experience grace! We *can* choose the good! We *can* chose our God! We can choose to live abundantly—now and always in God's embrace. And God will be there for us—in sickness and in health, in blessings and curses, in pain and joy, God will be there with all of us!

Even when we suffer, God's healing and restorative shalom is available to us. Even when we falter, God is waiting to pick us up and offer us life again. Even in our deepest fears God is already whispering "Hope, peace, love," so that each of us can accept God's offer of life *and life abundant*. And that is the blessing which binds us one to another, and that is what makes church out of a gathering of people: that we can *choose life*! Now, in every moment, and forever,

Amen?

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

15See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16If 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. 17But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18I 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. 19I 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, 20loving 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.