

Choosing Life

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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What does it mean to choose life? This is the admonition at the heart of today's Old Testament lesson. But what does it mean?

Our text today from Deuteronomy is one of those biblical texts that can become merely a *pretext* for preaching whatever you want. And to prevent me from doing that, I'm going to start today by focusing closely on this passage of scripture before saying anything else.

Here's what we have in this passage: Moses, and his successor Joshua, and the Children of Israel all stand together on the banks of the River Jordan.

Behind them lies the wilderness, that vast desert where they have wandered, and where so many have died and been buried; behind them lies the sea across which God brought them; and, of course, behind them, ultimately, lies Egypt where they were enslaved for four hundred years.

Before them lies the Promised Land. At least one entire generation of the people that Moses led up out of Egyptian bondage have passed away in the wilderness, and Moses himself is in the last days of his own twilight. The people will enter the Promised Land. Moses will not.

Moses places before his people their greatest challenge, greater even than fleeing bondage. He challenges them to leave behind the wilderness and to enter into the Promised Land. As much as they've complained about it, they have, nevertheless, become rather comfortable with existence in the desert. They are rather like the two elderly ladies at a Catskill Mountain Resort. One says to the other, "The food here tastes terrible. I can hardly bear to put it in my mouth." And the other says, "I agree. It's awful. And such small portions." The Children of Israel hate the hotel, but they just can't bring themselves to check out.

So Moses steels his people for life beyond bondage and beyond the wilderness, for a life of freedom in a land where they can husband their vineyards and steward their farmsteads and inhabit their towns. Life across the River will require conflict. It will entail risks of all sorts, and all the dangers of civilization and a complex society. And in order to navigate that dangerous new world, Moses reminds the people of the covenant God has made with them and the commandments God has given them to order their lives together.

Moses commands them: When confronted with the choice between life and death, *choose life*.

When confronted with a choice between blessing and cursing, *choose blessing*.

When confronted with the choice between remaining true to the Lord your God who created you and loves you, or seeking after other gods who will entice you, *choose the Lord*.

“Choose life,” says Moses “so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.”

With these words still echoing around the campsite, the Lord called Moses and Joshua aside and told them that after the Children of Israel enter into the Promised Land, and once they are settled there, the people will abandon the Lord. They will prostitute themselves, chasing after other gods. They will do everything in their power to break God’s covenant with them.

Enough won’t be enough. They will hunger for more. They will yearn for security. And when they get nervous about their crops and vineyards, they will turn to the false gods that falsely promise security. When they get worried about whether they themselves will be fruitful and multiply, they will make sacrifices to false gods who promise fertility. Life, we know, includes illness, aging and death, and they will not tolerate such insecurities, but will want control over life’s contingencies. They would rather delude themselves with the lies of false gods than trust in the mercy of the Lord.

The simple promise that God holds them in the palm of his hand whatever may befall them in life, will not be enough for them. They will insist on trying to manipulate the fates. They will try to rig the wheel of fortune. They will come to hate freedom and life because freedom and life are burdened with uncertainty.

Why, oh why, is it so difficult to choose life? Maybe we already know why.

Many years ago I heard a sermon by my old friend Professor Lewie Donelson. Don’t tell him I said this about him, but Lewie is one of the two or three greatest New Testament scholars in our country. He was preaching on the crucifixion of Jesus in the chapel at Austin Seminary one Tuesday. I seem to remember that it was about this time of year as we were edging closer to Lent.

Lewie was preaching from Mark’s Gospel, and he was explaining why he found it impossible to warm to any of the classical theological interpretations of the atonement, that doctrine in the church that has tried to understand the meaning of the death of Jesus.

Some have seen Jesus’ death as a victory over Satan who got tricked into getting the Romans to crucify Jesus only to discover that in his death Jesus conquered the powers of evil and of death. We’ve called that the Christus Victor interpretation of the atonement.

Others have seen the death of Jesus as a kind of transaction in which God’s honor was repaired by the death of his innocent Son. That interpretation has generally been called the substitutionary model of atonement.

And still others have seen the death of Jesus as the announcement of a way of life lived out consistently even to the point of death trusting God for the outcome. This view of the atonement is called the Moral Exemplary model of the atonement.

Lewie said that all of these explanations leave him cold. He clings to the story without the theological interpretations, he said, because every explanation tries to make the crucifixion understandable. He clings to the story, just the story, because, he said, nothing can explain this death. Jesus hangs there on the cross, Lewie says, beyond explanation. This man of extraordinary goodness, this teacher of the faith, this healer of the sick, this man in whom we have met God, was crucified. Lewie told us that day: "There's no place for us to stand at the foot of the cross. The ground drops away beneath our feet. And that's where we live. With no ground to stand on."

To choose life means that we recognize that we are working without a net. All the nets offered by this world are illusions. Freedom requires choices, sometimes agonizing choices, and the choices have real consequences. There are gains, but there are also losses. And nothing, but nothing, is guaranteed. And clinging to illusions, illusions of control and permanence and existence and security only leads to a living death, and that is not the life for which we were created.

Pema Chodron, a wonderful teacher of spirituality, once remarked that the trick to living is to learn to live with the groundlessness of life, its fundamental uncertainty. She explains that when we turn our minds to walking the path of truth and life, we do not find security. In fact, turning to the deep truth of life we acknowledge life's impermanence, its continual changes, its ambiguity, and the human dilemma of simple not knowing. These realities are the basic characteristics of life, and when we choose life we are choosing not to avoid these realities.

And that's the point, that's the vital clue to what it means to choose life, and why it is so hard to do.

Nothing in life is guaranteed. Nothing is sure. All the little things and the big ones too are up for grabs, my friends. Living means being conscious of this profound and simple reality. But here's the good news. God is not a thing.

Several years ago, Patrick Hart, the monk who served in Gethesemani Abbey as the last secretary to the great Thomas Merton, was leading a small group of us across the little valley from the monastery to visit the humble hermitage where Merton lived and wrote. Someone in the group asked him, "What is the most important thing you learned from Father Merton?" I thought the lady who asked the question was going to faint when Brother Patrick answered, "Oh, that's easy. Merton taught me that God is NoThing, No Thing."

False gods are things, created things, that promise to insulate us from the painful realities of life. But God, beyond the realm of all things, holds us precious amid life's changes and dangers. He does not promise to take them away, but he does promise never to let us go.

Maybe this is what Lewie meant by saying there's no place for us to stand at the foot of the cross. Or, perhaps it is what that greatest thinker of the medieval church, Meister Eckhart, meant when he said that we are meant to live in the Groundless Ground of God.

I think Meister Eckhart is especially helpful here. Eckhart often referred to God as “No Thing.” Merton got his idea of God as “No Thing” from Eckhart. God is not just another thing among all the other things we experience in this world. God is beneath and within and beyond and behind and above and below, but never just another thing. And nothing under heaven is guaranteed. Nothing under heaven is secure. Nothing.

If we wish to choose life, we will learn to trust God more than the life we choose, because God will hold us precious whatever life may bring.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we entrust ourselves and all who are dear to us to thy never failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that thou art doing better things than we can desire or pray for. Amen. (BCP, alt)