



Date: February 12, 2017

Title: "You Choose"

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Description: In his farewell message to the people of Israel, Moses concluded with one of the greatest bring-it-home lines ever: "Choose life!" As we clergy say, "That'll preach?" But what does it mean, really?

The people of Israel didn't know about Joshua. You and I have sung about Joshua and the battle of Jericho; Joshua, Moses' successor, leading the people across the River Jordan like it was the parting of the Red Sea; Joshua their great general when they first stood on the soil of the Promised Land. But at this point, Joshua was the next chapter of their story with God. All the people knew was Moses. Moses was all they'd ever known.

Now, in Deuteronomy, chapter 30, at the foot of Mt. Nebo, Moses was giving his farewell address. He ends his fiery message with one of the best bring-it-home sermon lines of all time: "Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live." As they say whenever preachers gather, "Now that'll preach!"

I wish it were that simple, don't you? There's an old trick used by debate teams and trial lawyers designed to funnel listeners in the direction you want them to go. Present a black-and-white view of the situation. It's either this or that, no options, no middle ground. Just pick one, and you have to pick.

A couple years ago there was a televised debate between Ken Ham, a fundamental televangelist who created The Ark Encounter, a Noah theme park in Kentucky, and Bill Nye, a.k.a. Bill Nye, the Science Guy. Nye thought he would expose Ken Ham's theories as ...alternative facts. As it turned out, Nye was creamed. During the debate, the creationist Ham put it to his listeners this way: "Either you accept the Bible, divine creation, moral order, motherhood, apple pie, and puppies; or else you support evolution, anarchy, ritual sacrifice, and Festivus." You could just picture people all over the country sitting in their Barcaloungers, asking, "Honey, what's 'Festivus'?" But

they did know they loved their puppies, so no way were they going to side with that Science Guy.

When was the last time you got to choose clearly between life or death, good or evil? It isn't that simple. Still, "choose life," Moses urges. And he hammers it: the words "life" or "live" occur eight times in this closing paragraph, in every single verse. The word "today" occurs four times. This isn't about choosing heaven in the sweet-by-and-by; it's about what's happening now. Most surprisingly, every time Moses uses the word "you", it's singular. He isn't talking to the nation of Israel; he's talking to every single citizen. He isn't saying "y'all"; he's calling you by name, one by one. He's saying, "You want to make America great again? Start by making *yourself* great! You wish our people were kinder, more caring towards others, more tolerant of outsiders? *You* be those things.

"Have a blessed day," she smiled as she handed me my coffee at the drive-through window. I suppose she meant, "Have a pleasant day. Have a day when things work out well." Moses, on the other hand, meant, "Live your life, make your choices so that having a good day will be the outcome."

"Choose life," urges Moses. But do not be naïve; that choice will cost you. Choosing life is not free. It is not the easy, low-maintenance option. I'm thinking of the person whose job was causing his soul to wither inside him. Almost daily he had to act in ways that violated his values. So he quit. He talked it over with his family and with their endorsement, just walked away from it. That was several months ago. He is still looking for work. He chose life, and it's costing him. It has not been easy, but he chose life over a slow death.

I'm thinking of a friend in a grueling, drawn-out struggle with cancer. The level of medications required to wipe out his pain would also wipe out his consciousness. He is choosing to endure the pain in order to remain mentally present to his wife and children. It is not easy. Every hour he pays the price. But he is choosing life.

I'm thinking of the woman who refused the surgery that might have purchased her a few more weeks. The time in post-surgical I.C.U. would have attached her to monitors and ventilators, groggy with the aftereffects of anesthesia. But without the surgery she had almost no time left. She called her family to the hospital. Around her bedside, they had dinner together, laughed and cried sharing memories, and they accepted her decision to return the consent papers unsigned. She died in her sleep that night. "She chose life," said her sons and daughter. "It was her final gift to us."

“Choose life,” urged Moses. Moses knew they needed to hear it, because he knew the choice would seldom be an easy one. It also is not always a major one.

They were a mixed-race couple, doing their grocery shopping together on an early Sunday afternoon. Not all that unusual a sight here in the metro-Atlanta ‘burbs. Fifty or so years ago, he would’ve been lynched, holding hands with her like that in public. These days, maybe an occasional sideways glance from a passing customer, but mostly ignored.

I’d stopped in there after worship with Andy’s sermon on my mind. Especially the scripture passage, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.” That’s when I saw them. Sorry, folks, the grocery store is not my turf; I’m not responsible for hospitality here.

Ahead of me in the produce section, the couple stopped, he driving the cart, she selecting the fruits and vegetables. By this time, I was a few paces ahead of them. Impulsively, I turned abruptly.

“Say,” I said, catching his eye. “Nice hair style!”, pointing to my own coiffure. (Like mine, his head was shaved, the ultimate G.Q. look in masculinity, don’t you think?) For a split second, he looked startled. An old white man comparing his haircut with the young brother. Then he broke into a belly-laugh. Not merely a polite smile, we’re talking “HAHAHA!” “Hey, Babe,” he called to her, “did you hear that?” He reached out his hand to fist-pump me.

It really, really was not that funny. It really, really was out of my comfort zone; I’m just not a person who greets everyone in the grocery aisle. I wonder if their typical shopping experience, though not marked by public hostility, may not contain much warmth from strangers. Especially older strangers, gentlemen wearing a coat-and-tie. (Remember, I’d just come from worship.) Who knows?

That two-and-a-half-second incident was so small, I hesitate to think of it as a “choose life” moment. In terms of importance, it was miniscule. In terms of discipleship, it’s as far from “Take up your cross and follow me” as possible.

Still, maybe most opportunities to choose life are microscopic. Life is more likely to be chosen by the spoonful as by the truckload. Heaven may not have noticed, but it felt ever so briefly that for a moment my faith escaped the church and landed in the grocery store. And I got to choose. At least I made them smile. And he got to admire my hair style.

How do you choose life? Not just in those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, but in the everyday moments so small they almost pass by unnoticed. Moses tells them how, ever so briefly because he's already spelled it out in detail. v. 19-20. "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, *loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him*; for that means life to you."

You choose life by loving life. In particular, by loving the God who created life and who gives life. "It isn't complicated, people" Moses said in the paragraph before, vv. 11-13. "¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" (It isn't rocket science.) ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" (It isn't hard to reach and exclusively for professionals.) ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Choose to love God by listening to God's voice within you. You have a built-in passion for life. You have a built-in sense of what is right. Slow down enough to listen to your own heart, and you'll know what to do.

"*Loving the Lord your God, obeying him.*" Life is more than passion and fireworks; sometimes choosing life means doing the right thing. It's helping a friend when it's inconvenient; it's doing your share of the family chores, even when you don't get thanked for it; it's saying "no" to an opportunity that glistens like an alligator's smile in the moonlight.

"*Loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.*" Sometimes you choose life by just holding on. Sometimes you hold on with all you got because deep down inside you know you have no choice. So you choose to hold fast "in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health..."

Moses may not appreciate what I'm about to do. I've never watched a single episode of Grey's Anatomy, but I'm about to cast Moses as a female wearing nursing scrubs. While the Deuteronomy Moses commanded and the Grey's Anatomy character pleads, they both have the same message. You choose. Choose well.

video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax4Hu1zuGkI>.

Do not tell me you are not strong enough to choose life, for Christ who has overcome the world and conquered death itself dwells within you. Don't tell me you cannot endure, for the Spirit who will never leave you nor forsake you abides with you forever.

It comes down to this: do you want to choose life? Don't tell me you simply don't care enough. Because that will break my heart. It will break your heart as well, you already know that. Choose life.