“Gotcha vs. I’ve Got You”

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Psalm 119: 1-8

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On one hand, I’m a big chicken. I don’t skydive, I don’t gamble for big stakes and I don’t see scary movies.

But on the other hand, as a movie fan, I do like to see everything that is nominated for the Oscars. There were a lot of great movies this year. 1917 (epic). Little Women (lovely). Marriage Story (heartbreaking and hopeful). The Irishman (bleeping great). Knives Out (clever). And I was promised by a number of people that despite *Parasite’s* scary name and though the trailer for *Parasite* is a scary trailer, it’s not REALLY a scary movie. So I watched it and I can tell you for certain . . . they lied.

*Parasite* has a whole host of “gotcha” moments. The movie takes so many twists and turns, has so many “Are you kidding me?” reveals, it’s exciting to watch. But is it scary? Of course it is! Any movie that suggests I may not know what’s going on in my own house—that’s scary. Though this movie’s tale of two interdependent families in South Korea is uniquely odd, its humanity has universal appeal. In the homes of moviegoers across the world, when we now walk into a dark room and flip on the lights, we are frighteningly aware we have no idea what we’ve sent scurrying into the shadows. *Parasite* makes me wonder, “Do I have my house in order?”

How do you know if your house is in order? If you’re doing life right? There are so many different things to watch out for, to guard against, to ensure, it feels impossible to be on top of it all. There are so many variables, things that can happen or fail to happen that are beyond our control.

If only there was some playbook, some guidelines, some instructions we could follow that would ensure all shall be well.

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The decalogue, the ten commandments, is Torah, a concise listing of rules to follow so we may live. Dr. Paul Huh writes that though we usually translate the word Torah as God’s *law*, it is best translated as God’s *instruction*[[1]](#footnote-1). When you read the ten commandments as God’s instructions, you can see them as a gift rather than a list of draconian boundaries or limits.

These ten rules are God’s gift to you and me. God says, “Here. Do these things. You will live a full life and not have to look over your shoulder if you simply Do. These. Things.”

Unlike Jordan Peele, Stephen King and Parasite writer Bong Joon ho, God isn’t in the “Gotcha!” business. God is in the “I’ve Got You” business.

In Deuteronomy 30:15 we receive a clear choice: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” Choice A: life and prosperity. Choice B: death and adversity. This choice is not from a *Gotcha God* setting us up to fail, but from our God who first gave us life and now invites us to live it fully.

The scriptural context: Moses is near the end of his life, after leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and through the desert for forty years. He’s taking stock of his life like many folks do in their latter days. He’s passing down wisdom like a grandfather to his grandchildren: he’s sharing with people how they are to live.

Life in the desert is harsh. Food and water are scarce, and enemies are abundant. People living under stressful situations have a better chance of surviving if the rules are clear and are followed. Moses’ message isn’t a “gotcha” message, as in “Do this or else!” Moses points out in our very first verse that we are given a choice. We are offered life. He’s urging us to say “Yes.”

Moses’ words sound like a restriction to those of us living in a world of rules. But his urging to “choose life” is not a restriction, it’s a prescription.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We Presbyterians choose to read the Bible while paying close attention to context: what was happening in the world at that time? What were the customs, the cultural norms? What would these words mean to the original audience? Often we don’t take scripture “literally” but instead deduce the meaning given all the information we have. A “day” may not necessarily be exactly 24 hours, but one complete cycle. 40 years or 40 days might not be measured in exact hours but instead language that means “a really long time.”

But here it’s pretty clear Moses is speaking literally. Moses is saying follow God’s law, the ten commandments, so you can SURVIVE. So you won’t be killed by your children or your neighbor. So your enemies won’t attack because you took what is theirs. So you’ll put your energy into meaningful work that will feed you, house you, and keep the peace in community.

In Jesus’ time, he preaches the same message but employs the use of the word “life” in a more nuanced way. Yes, as Moses said, following the law will help you survive . . . AND . . . Jesus says, there is so much more. “I am the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14: 6) Jesus is offering far more than survival: “He who believes in me will never die.” (John 11: 26) Jesus offers us eternal life.

And how about right now? What if you are pretty sure you can survive and you don’t want to wait for eternity to grasp life? We heard Psalm 119: “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep God’s decrees, who seek God with their whole heart.” Follow God’s instructions now and you will not only survive but thrive.

What’s the alternative to living life fully? It may be more subtle than you imagine.

Those of us not following God’s laws are dying a very slow death. Dr. Brett Younger writes, “Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We’re going to die from the effort of wanting. Desiring, worshiping what our neighbor has: her new car or her husband or her beautiful new landscaping. Out of control wanting violates commandments 1, 2, 9, and 10.

What’s the harm, you ask, in *really* wanting what our neighbor has? A lack of joy. An inability to be happy. The absence of contentment. Susie-the-wanter’s tombstone might read: “Susie was always just a few purchases away from lasting happiness.”

Consider the alternative: Susie finding joy looking at blooming flowers, celebrating the neighbors’ healthy relationship, appreciating the absence of big monthly car payments. If Susie lived according to God’s law, her tombstone could read, “Susie’s love of daffodils and friendships enriched her life and the lives of those who knew her.” Now that is living fully.

We’re slowly dying from the effort of keeping our story straight, keeping the lies or half-truths in line. Just swear that you’re way too busy to spend a day away from work (or from whatever commands your life) and you’ve broken commandments 1, 2, and 3. Double down to get out of Sunday dinner with your parents and you’ve got 4 covered too. Aren’t you clever to avoid sabbath? “Wow, Stephen was the busiest person in the world.”

The alternative? If Stephen follows God’s instructions, his tombstone might read, “Stephen found deep, abiding joy in honoring God, his family and friends, and himself.”

Behind curtain A: life and prosperity. Behind curtain B: death and adversity. Like the audience who screams advice to contestants on a game show, Moses and Jesus are saying, “Choose Curtain A! Curtain A!”

Here’s another gift: choosing life isn’t one single do-or-die decision. Choosing to live is a life-long process. We say “yes!” to life in the big and tiny choices we make every single day. Crippling guilt from your big night out and what you said and did? Choose to apologize, to take care of your damaged body, to be the designated driver next time. Steal that clever idea from your colleague or from another student and it’s gnawing away at your conscience? Own up to it. And next time, credit the right person, and rise together. There are a myriad of ways to “choose life” every single day.

Dr. Brett Younger writes a long list that ranges from “Clean out a drawer” to “Believe that God loves you.” I’ve printed out his list and I challenge you to take one home with you and cross a few items off this week. Cross off more by the end of the month. Perhaps consider making one of them your intention beginning Ash Wednesday and continuing all the way through Lent. But wait, there’s more! Choose life and watch it spread. Because Deuteronomy tells us that if you choose life, you become a blessing to those around you. “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying God, holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days….”

During Alice Brandt’s funeral yesterday, her grandson Andrew said that though he is not a member of Pleasant Hill Presbyterian, it is clear to his family that the work of this church is bearing fruit. His family has felt genuinely cared for this past month by a church they don’t even know. Alice was a true disciple, a follower of God’s law, and a blessing to us. And now, through us, that blessing lives on and we are passing it forward.

Back to *Parasite* and being scared. Here’s what I don’t fear—eternal damnation from a “Gotcha God” because I’ve lost my temper, taken a wrong turn, or made a bad decision. While the movie *Parasite* made me scared of something unknown being in my house, I am not afraid of what’s in my heart. God is in my heart, a loving, forgiving God who as “got me.” God who has given me the gift of instruction, a prescription for living, and the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ when I need forgiveness.

The law God gives to us is meant not to scare us but to keep us safe. God is in charge. Really and truly. Yes, we make decisions every single day that change the course of our lives, but in the grand scheme of things—God’s GOT us. We are in the palm of God’s hand. We are fearfully and wonderfully made and then invited to live fully. Invited to choose life.

And knowing that, I can quit looking over my shoulder. Give up my fear of failing God. Of failing others. Of failing myself. Within God’s laws there is a tremendous amount of freedom. Together, let’s choose to embrace life. Amen.

How to “Choose Life” by Brett Younger

1. Learn things you have told yourself you would never learn.
2. Enjoy simple things.
3. Play with children.
4. Laugh often, long, and loud.
5. Cry when it is time to cry.
6. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others.
7. Celebrate sex with the one to whom you have given your life.
8. Surround yourself with what you love—whether it’s family, friends, pets, music, nature, or silence.
9. Walk around the block.
10. Turn off the television.
11. Get together with your friends.
12. Invite a stranger to lunch or dinner.
13. Clean out a drawer.
14. Read a book of poetry.
15. Quit doing what is not worth your time.
16. Do something so someone else will not have to.
17. Give money to a cause you care about.
18. Stop arguing.
19. Apologize to someone, even if it was mostly his fault.
20. Forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it.
21. Have patience.
22. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth.
23. Figure out what you hope for and live with that hope.
24. Worship with all your heart.
25. Pray genuinely.
26. Love your church.
27. Believe that God loves you.
28. Remember the stories of Jesus.
29. See Christ in the people around you.
30. Share God’s love with someone who has forgotten it.
31. Delight in God’s good gifts.
32. See that all of life is holy.
33. Open your heart to the Spirit.
34. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort.
35. Life in the joy beneath it all.
36. Let God make your life wonderful.

Brett Younger in *Feasting on the Word,* Year A, Volume 1, eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 343.

1. Paul Huh, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A Vol 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carol J. Dempsey, Ibid, pp.338-342. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brett Younger, Ibid, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)