**SERMON Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

We sometimes play a game with the youth called, ‘Would you rather?” The whole premise of the game is that a leader calls a question starting with the words, would you rather…and then gives you only two options, and you have to pick one. So, I thought we’d try some this morning. *I’ve got some volunteers to help me. Now usually we would get the kids to move from one side of the room or the other depending on their choice. But I won’t make you do that. Instead we’ll either raise our hands straight out in front or touch your nose. <<READY?>>*

* Would you rather always be 10 minutes late or always be 20 minutes early?
* Would you rather super sensitive taste or super sensitive hearing?
* Would you rather be covered in fur or covered in scales?
* Would you rather never get angry or never be envious?
* Would you rather know an uncomfortable truth or believe a comforting lie?

*Thank you, all did so well.* It’s not so easy when there’s no inbetween, halv-ies, option. Your answer is limited to one of two choices. Before we launch into the message this morning, let’s bow our heads to pray together:

Lord God,

We come to your Word this morning from a myriad of experiences and perspectives. We are individuals – yes, but at this time, and in this place we come to worship you as a community. So, open our ears, open our hearts, that together we might be transformed into your beloved community, who witnesses to you. May this Word today refresh and inspire us for that purpose, and that purpose alone. Amen

As far as limited choices go, the choice that Moses gives the people of Israel seems at first glance an easy one. The Common English Bible translation actually stays closer to the Hebrew wording than the NRSV, saying: “Today, I’ve set before you - life and what’s good versus death and what’s wrong.” Although this choice might seem to be a pretty straightforward “Would you rather?” game, here the stakes are rather higher. In order too really grasp what is at stake we must look at how God has defined ‘life and what is good’ in the wider context of Deuteronomy.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT - DEUTERONOMY**

So, here’s a whistle stop tour of where we are in the Biblical story at this juncture. After the exodus from Egypt Israel was at Mount Sinai for one year entering into a covenant with their God, Yahweh. Next, they had the disastrous road trip through the wilderness during which the Exodus Generation manage to disqualify themselves from entering into the land promised to Abraham. By this time most of that generation that had fled from Egypt had died. So, Deuteronomy begins with Moses standing in front of this new generation explaining the Torah. He, 120 years old by this stage, gives a series of speeches calling this next generation of Israel to be faithful to their part of the deal, in a way that their parents and grandparents were not.

At the center of the book is a collection of laws. These are the terms of the covenantal agreement between this God, Yahweh and his people, Israel. Some laws are new, but many are repeated from those given earlier at Mount Sinai – which is actually where the book gets its name - from the Greek ’*detero/nom/i/on*’ which means “second law” or ‘second giving of the law.’ These laws were to be guidelines and policies for how Israel was to live as people of God, and after reciting this collection of laws, from chapter 12 through chapter 26, rules that were designed to shape the people of Israel in a way that was distinctive from the nations that surrounded them, policies and practices that would order and direct the way they lived and worshipped. God uses the aging Moses to issue a final challenge to the assembly, urging Israel to accept its past failures and to recommit to the covenant relationship with God. The section that our lectionary text comes from today is *Moses’ Farewell Address* to the people of Israel*.* It is one of the greatest of all the Bible’s speeches, challenging the nation to choose between paths either of obedience and life or disobedience and death.

**CANONICAL CONTEXT – DEUTERONOMY, MATTHEW, 1 CORINTHIANS**

This choice is theirs to make. A choice that Moses, as well as his successor Joshua, insists that Israel must make - *Are you in this thing, or not?* *Would you rather life on God’s terms or on yours – which is really not life at all, but death?* Because, even though they are not yet an independent or self-governing nation, they ARE responsible as a community of humans in covenant with their Creator - for the shape their life together will take from this point on. Throughout the Scripture we see this ‘life’ that God envisions explained and parsed out. We’ve spent that last few weeks studying “The Sermon on the Mount,” in the Book of Matthew as Jesus delivers a 4-chapter speech which establishes the terms of a new covenant between Creator God and all of Creation, whereby a holy community is formed and shaped around Jesus and his saving presence.

But even by the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, there is an interesting tension. A tension of how God is understood and how humans are understanding in relation *to* God and in relationship *with* God. God is sovereign: Yahweh, The Ever-Living, Still-Speaking I AM is all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present; and yet the people that the sovereign God draws into relationship, are not to be puppets. They are co-creators, covenantal partners with their unseen, mysterious God who has promised to reveal what they need, and work for their good in the context of relationship. Their future, **their communal destiny is shaped by choices they get to make** within the providence of God.

**THE TROUBLE IN THE TEXT**

The constant peril and danger for Israel is to allow something else to become the center of their affection and loyalty. The lure of *other gods* (v17), gods that seems to make themselves more accessible to mere humans, whose essence can be channeled through wooden and metal objects of devotion, is a powerful lure. But, the challenge of worshipping other gods is *not* that they may *do* something to the people, but that in worshipping other gods *the people of Israel* – the very ones chosen by Yahweh, to be set apart to witness to God – enter into a different story, with a different author. How can you be a distinctive witness to The Ever-Living, Still-Speaking God, a God that desires relationship over almost anything else, if you step into a different story that has pernicious, selfish gods and kings at the center - whose whims and wants operate to manipulate and twist your identity, to make out that you are not, in fact, chosen…but pawns. Devotion to other gods shape perception. It reshapes and influences our understanding of life’s purpose. Different gods have different stories, opposite from the story of Yahweh. And Moses is saying that The Ever-Living, Still-Speaking God is to be Israel’s life; all other gods are her demise, downfall and death.

**THE TROUBLE TODAY**

We as individuals and we, as the church face the very same life and death decision today. Like Israel, the church is always under threat to forget the story of grace and to enter into a counterfeit narrative: stories of other gods and values, with other purposes. Like Israel, prophets occasionally emerge to name our idols and call us back to the vision of God. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of our contemporary prophets, recognized the idols of contemporary America in a series of sermons in Atlanta during the summer of 1953. He talks of The False God of Nationalism,” arguing that God and nationalism are “incompatible,” posing the question: “Will we continue to serve the false god of racial prejudice or will we serve the God who made of one blood all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.” Nationalism, however, is not the only idol King identifies. In his concluding sermon of the series, Dr. King reflects on “the tragic consequences which develop when men worship the almighty dollar.” He asserts that his listeners must choose between “the transitory god of money which is here today and gone tomorrow” and “the eternal God of the universe who is the same yesterday, today and forever.”

The lure of other gods is strong, and none of us is immune to the fears they instill in our psyches. We all live in a world which continually, explicitly and implicitly, preaches to us the false gospel of nationalism and the false gospel of wealth. Both these gospels are founded on fear – fear of the other, and fear of scarcity. These fears dominate our present culture, taint our perception of the world around us, and colonize our imaginations with regard to what is possible.

So, today is decision day. What will you choose?

…your own financial security, or the security of all, including the least of these,

…your right to accumulation or the kingdom of God in which all have what they need,

…your right to extract and exploit the earth, or the Garden restored, humanity in harmony with and care for creation,

…freedom for all or security for some,

…separating immigrant families or providing sanctuary for them,

…criminalizing addiction or offering the resurrective power of recovery,

…xenophobia or an embrace of the vision of God who make of one blood all people to dwell upon the earth.

Moses’ words remind us that we must choose the path consistent with God, in whose image we are made. A God who preaches a gospel not of fear and scarcity, but of trust and abundance. Like the people of Israel, we must choose the path of God which leads to life.

**THE GOOD NEWS IN THE TEXT**

So, what is this life that is to be preferred, and how do we choose it? We see in verses 15 and 16, Moses notes that the original purpose of the creation of LIFE is to be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth, essentially the purpose of LIFE is to LIVE. Is there any wonder as to why Deuteronomy constantly develops laws to protect life, especially the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable people?

We see in the vast body of laws and policies in Deuteronomy chapters 12-26, a concern for all areas of LIFE. Even how they worshipped God. God was to be worshiped centrally in the temple, but in the same way God was to be worshipped in Israel’s care of its poor. For example, all Israelites will set aside one-tenth of their annual income to be given to the temple, but another tenth was to be set aside every three years and given to the poor. These are the kinds of laws that put Israel on the cutting edge of justice and compassion compared with their ancient neighbors, and it was part and parcel of their worship of God.

There were laws which outline the character qualities that Israel’s leaders should have - so that the elders, the priests, and the kings, were all placed under the authority off the covenant agreement which God said he would enforce by sending prophets to keep the leaders accountable. So, in contrast to Israel’s neighbors, where kings were thought of as divine and a law in and of themselves, Israel’s leaders were subordinate to the law and the prophets.

There are laws about Israel’s civil life, rules about marriage, and family, and business, and also about social justice - about the legal system and how it was to protect widows, and orphans, and immigrants.

All these laws were created to set Israel apart. God was setting a vision for Israel’s social, spiritual and political life together. A vision that would hold Israel to a higher level of justice that was ever known before. And theses practice of justice, compassion, and generosity are the very practices that maintain and sustain life. Life - the very goal of creation.

So, how are the people of God to choose the way of God which leads to life? This passage makes it obvious: they were to walk in God’s ways and keep God’s commandments which assured that EVERYONE in their society had what they need to also LIVE.

**THE GOOD NEWS TODAY**

The transformed people of God not only envision the world differently but are a picture that reflects the character and purpose of The Ever-Living God. We are to be formed and shaped around the person and work of God’s own Son, Jesus. We are to be a holy community who CHOOSE to live in a way that is characterized by love for God and others, both inside an out.

One of the verses that struck me was Deuteronomy 30:19, when Moses calls upon “*heaven*” and in Hebrew this can also simply mean *the skies* and “earth*,*” *the land,* “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” *your children, and your children’s children,* “may live.”

We can say we choose the way of God which leads to life all we want but until there is action behind it nothing is going to change. We have a responsibility, a choice, that will have a lasting impact on the generations after us. This is true for the decisions we make regarding how we worship, how we serve, how we interact and treat the some vulnerable in society, and also how we treat the very air we breathe and land we live on. The Earth is not only a witness to our collective actions, but something that is directly affected by them as well.

Our reasons for action matter as well, as they determine the proportions of the actions we take. If our intentions are to save the world for our generation alone, long-term changes just aren’t going to be made. Are we choosing life out of spite? Necessity? Validation? Love?

Being a young person today, it’s sometimes difficult to not be cynical about the future of the Earth. It can feel easy to blame previous generations for depleting natural resources, polluting skies and seas and harming the Planet. While those thoughts absolutely have truth to them, it’s important to remember that when we get caught up in the curses that were handed down to us, we forget that we have a choice to make, and we have been given the blessings we need to make it. It’s a choice that needs to be made now and followed through on. In the words of Greta Thunberg, “Maybe they [future children] will ask why you didn’t do anything while there still was time to act.” If we don’t do more to help, maybe they will call ours the generation that did nothing, or perhaps the generation that didn’t do enough.

Our passage today ends by telling us blatantly to **choose the way of God which leads to life** not only for ourselves but for those who will come after us. A choice between being the generation that did nothing or the one that turned it around. Which will you choose?