

MESSAGE: “Choose Life”

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to anchor life’s purpose with a resolve to follow God’s commands.

Introduction

While approaching a busy intersection in the commercial district of town, a man stopped at a crosswalk for a yellow light. Believing he could have made it through, the frustrated, stressed woman tailgating him slammed her horn and launched into a full-fledged tirade, dropping her cell-phone and make-up.

Mid-rant, she heard a tap at the window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit the car with hands up. She took the woman to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. She said, “I’m very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak. I noticed the ‘Choose Life’ license plate holder, the ‘What would Jesus do?’ bumper sticker, the ‘Follow me to Sunday School’ sticker and the Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car...”

If we are honest, all of us have some moments of hypocrisy in our nature. Someone once told me that he chose not to go to church because of all the hypocrites there. I responded by saying, “That’s ok, we always have room for one more!” I like to think that we are ‘kids under construction;’ we are growing in grace, but we have not yet arrived. Discipleship is a dynamic journey as our beliefs and behaviors are reshaped according to God’s intent.

The motto, *Choose Life*, has become a catch-phrase in our culture. It is used of the pro-life movement as it was in our opening illustration, and, before his recent passing, it was used by George Michael and his musical duo Wham in a campaign against suicide. But the phrase is a biblical one that goes back to the early days of Judaism.

The book of Deuteronomy, the last of the ‘five books of Moses,’ is a restatement of the covenant that God established with Israel at Mount Sinai. Moses is now an old man, 120 according to the text, and he is ready to pass leadership on to Joshua who will lead the people across the Jordan River to the Promised Land. Cognizant of his impending death, he calls the people back to the contract with God that makes them unique and secure, a Constitution of sorts that will guide them to ethical living, governmental order and

happiness. Moses encourages the people to embrace the Covenant and obey God's commands so they will inherit the blessings it promises rather than the curses it warns against.

Read Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

Moses' clarion call to faithfulness is proclaimed as if in a Court of Law. The benefits of faithfulness are described, along with the consequences of disobedience. Heaven and earth attend as witnesses to the contract between God and Israel. A choice is given. One leads to life and joy; the other to death and grief. Moses is not naïve. He knows human nature and well remembers how the people violated God's commandments even before he descended from the mountain with the tablets of stone that spelled them out. In fact, if we were to read further in the text, we would see that Moses anticipates how history will repeat itself, but he nevertheless trusts in God's faithfulness and grace even in the midst of human disobedience.

Moses basically says, "You have two roads before you: one will bring you joy and life, the other sorrow and death. You may choose either one, but I would suggest you 'choose life.'" Every generation of humankind since has been given the same choice. There are two roads ahead: one of faithfulness to God which leads to life, the other of selfish intent which leads to death. Which will I choose? Which will you choose?

Implied in this, of course, is the question of whether or not this is a real choice. Do we make the decision or does God? There are those who believe that God has decided who will choose life and who will not. We call this predestination. I remember my 'history of ideas' professor describing predestination like this: you have a choice to watch any channel on television and you choose to watch, let's say, channel 8. What you don't know is that every channel carries the same programming. So whether you choose channel 8, or 9, or 56, you will tune into the same broadcast. You choose the channel, but God decides the program.

Honestly, that does not sound like a real choice to me. When Moses renews the Covenant, he offers the people a real choice, but assertively counsels them to 'Choose Life.' "Who wouldn't choose life?" I can hear someone respond, but the truth is Israel frequently did not, and we frequently do not. A year ago, I discovered that I have diabetes. Since then, I have tried to make lifestyle changes that may support longevity. Some days I am successful, but on other days we have a Bean Supper and I find Steve Jamrog's incredible pie to be absolutely irresistible. One piece may not be a problem, but if I make such choices every day—it adds up to a problem.

What happens in the physical can also happen in the spiritual. If I ignore God's call to prayer, worship, Bible study and compassion on a daily basis, it compounds into a crisis of faith or an overwhelming feeling of 'Where is God when I need him?' In our walk with God, we learn what life really is—not poor substitutes like, banking lots of money, buying lots of things, having power over others or living from vacation to vacation. Some of these things are not wrong in and of themselves, but if they become the goal and sum total of our being, we will never discover the abundant life for which we were created. Abundant life in God is about balance--enjoying this wonderful world while learning, worshipping, working and investing in the lives of those around us.

Consider, for example, Sam Polk, a Wall Street Trader who became a millionaire many times over. One year, as he anticipated Christmas, he received notice that his Christmas bonus would be a paltry 3.7 million dollars. To his dismay, he found himself disappointed that the bonus wasn't bigger. Recognition of his greed served as a mirror reflection of his values and he realized he was giving his life to the wrong thing entirely. What did he do? He resigned his position, gave away most of his financial substance and went to work at a food cupboard. He found a life of joy, purpose and meaning far beyond anything he had experienced during his days on Wall Street.

Again, consider my friend Armand Fillian. I got to know Armand when he directed a production of *Pollyanna* in which my daughter performed. Months after the play concluded, he learned that he had incurable cancer. I visited him at the hospital three days before he died. He described for me many of the discoveries he made as he negotiated his illness—friends he didn't know he had, places he visited but had not taken time for, conversations of depth, moments that previously slipped away unnoticed.

Two days after he died, Armand's speech to Hospice volunteers at the Littleton Community House was published in the local newspaper. The paper emphasized one observation in particular, "If I were given the chance to go back in time to be diagnosed in time to be cured, I wouldn't do it. This has been the best year-and-a-half of my life!"

I close with an echo of Moses' words: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land (of promise)."