

Choose Life

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by thanking the four people who shared their stories last Sunday morning. I listened on the website this week and was very grateful that each one of you agreed to reflect about your own stories and how God has walked with you along the way.

Sharing publicly from one's own life can be a difficult thing. There is vulnerability. Sometimes, there are painful memories to relive. Sometimes we're not even sure where God has been at various points in our stories.

But each one of you who shared last Sunday gave our broader community a gift. It is a gift to get a window into personal journeys of faith.

I stand up here each Sunday and talk about God and life and the bible and Christian faith. I occasionally share from my own story, but more often my sermons are a form of teaching or encouraging or challenging.

This is appropriate and good. Churches have been listening to sermons for a very long time! But these are by no means the only way that God speaks (thank God!).

God speaks in and through human lives as well. God speaks in and through the example of suffering endured, faith tested, obstacles overcome, lessons learned, and joys discovered.

We see these things in the lives of others and we are given hope that maybe we can get through what we're facing, too.

We also simply get to know one another better. I learned things about each of the four people who shared last Sunday that I didn't know. I assume those who were here did, too.

The better we know one another, the stronger our relationships as a church family will be.

So thank you for your stories. Thank you for your examples of faith. Thank you for bearing witness to the faithfulness of Christ, sometimes in the midst of some very difficult times.

I have heard from a number of people how much they appreciated the stories last Sunday and hearing stories of faith more generally.

“We should do more of that,” I often hear. I agree. So, when Kevin phones you to ask if you’d be willing to share, I assume that everyone will say yes? 😊

There is no pressure or coercion, obviously. But I do encourage you to think about the possibility of sharing your story in the future. If you’re not comfortable sharing publicly, there are other options such as getting someone else to read your story, as Sarah did last Sunday.

Anyway, I do hope that we can continue to have faith stories be part of our corporate worship going into the future. I’m sure we will discuss how best to facilitate this at upcoming worship committee meetings.

Well, we’ve reached the first Sunday of a new academic year. This Sunday always feels like something of a “threshold Sunday.”

Early September is one of a handful of “new years” that many of us use to orient or mark time. The beginning of another academic year is experienced as a new beginning for many, particularly those with kids.

January 1 is another, obviously. The First Sunday of Advent would be yet another, as we mark the beginning of another year lived according to the story of Jesus.

These are logical points on our calendars and in our lives for us to recalibrate, reorient, recommit, or remind ourselves of important truths.

The beginning of this “new year” is an interesting one for Naomi and I with both of our kids starting college this year. “Back to school” looks and certainly feels different when you are the parent of adults.

But even beyond the reflections that come along with transitioning into a new stage of parenting, there are other more general questions that are natural to ask at moments of transition.

What habits of the heart and mind will be necessary to live well in this next stage of life? What practices will make me less prone to worry and more attentive to others?

What rhythms of life will sustain me in my vocation and in the relationships God has given me to tend?

What dead ends should be avoided? What lessons learned from my own story need to be more fully implemented?

What forms of faithfulness is God calling me to in the year ahead?

We can ask these questions at any point in the year, obviously, but, like I said, there are these moments in our calendars and in our lives where they seem to naturally bubble up to the surface?

Our reading from Deuteronomy takes place at another threshold moment.

The people of Israel stand on the banks of the Jordan River about to enter the Promised Land.

They have been led out of the slavery of Egypt. They have trudged around the Sinai desert for forty years for their lack of faithfulness and idolatry.

They have seen miraculous signs of God's faithfulness and they have experienced the consequences of their sins. They've been given the Law which will define them as the people of God and give parameters to their nation. They've been through a lot.

And now, they're assembled in front of Moses ready to take the next step in their story as a people.

Moses puts things plainly. There are two paths you can take. Two paths that lead to two destinations.

The path of life and prosperity or the path of death and destruction. You can choose obedience to God or idolatry.

“Choose life!” Moses says, “that you and your children might live.” Choose the path that leads to blessing and wholeness and right-relatedness to God and neighbour.

Don't just live on autopilot, doing the same things that have got you to this point. Decide, now, before you take one step into the land, how you will live. Decide who will have your allegiance. Decide who you will obey, the God who brought you out of Egypt and promised goodness in your future, or the lesser gods that will inevitably tempt you (the god of the self being the most consistent of these!).

Choose life! For God's sake and for your own!

Now, of course we know that life is not a formula. We know that life doesn't work quite as neatly as Moses makes it sound on the threshold of the Promised Land.

Obedience does not automatically lead to prosperity. Sometimes people of deep faith suffer incredibly. And sometimes people who don't give God a second thought cheerily breeze through life hardly encountering any obstacles along the way.

Life isn't always fair. The Bible itself acknowledges this in many places, perhaps most notably the Psalms, where a common refrain is, “God, why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?!”

Some of you know this from personal experience. It came through loud and clear in a few of the stories shared last week.

There are many Christians who believe that there is a straight line between obedience and blessing, but this view often crashes on the shores of reality at *some* point. Life just doesn't work that neatly.

Indeed, the very object of our faith—Jesus Christ—is the prime example of righteousness leading to suffering. Many of Jesus' first disciples also died young and suffered greatly for their faith.

So, Christians, of all people, should be very hesitant to say that obedience always and necessary leads to a life of material blessing and/or comfort.

And yet, the command to choose life is still given to us.

Is it possible to choose life, even in the context of hardship, sorrow, and death? Even when our obedience seems to go unrewarded? Even when prosperity and health and blessing seem miles away? Even when our strength is failing? Even when everything within us urges us to quit?

I think it is.

Choosing life is not just a one-time decision that we make during a transitional moment in our lives or on special days throughout the year. It's a daily discipline.

I got kind of an object lesson in this yesterday morning.

I was rudely interrupted from my slumbers at around 5:30 am by my dear wife who needed a ride to the starting line of a race called the Lost Soul Ultra.

This is quite a race. For some reason, people choose to run either 50, 100, or 200 km up and down the coulees over the course of anywhere from eight to 36 hours. They do all of this on purpose, apparently.

It's a gruelling race physically. Some people are in pretty rough shape when they cross the finish line (*if* they cross the finish line!).

But most runners will say that running is a mental thing. Not being a runner, I have to rely on the testimony of others for these things.

The body can do some pretty incredible things if the mind is disciplined. People can endure unbelievable pain if their minds have decided upon a destination.

As I watched these runners pound up and down the coulees and make their way in and out of the stations along the way, it seemed to me a visual embodiment of the journey of life and of faith.

The race is about choosing, with each step, to keep going.

When everything in you says, "This is madness! Human beings shouldn't do things like this! A cup of coffee and a newspaper seem like a much saner way to spend a Saturday morning!" these people make the choice to keep going.

They make these series of choices with every step because their goal is clear. They want the satisfaction of a race run. They want a rock with the words “Lost Soul Finisher” on it. They want to conquer pain and prove to themselves that they can do it. They want to know what a human being is capable of doing.

It’s an impressive and inspiring thing to see, even if I still think they’re kind of crazy!

(Naomi couldn’t finish, unfortunately. As you may know, she separated her shoulder a few weeks ago when she fell at a race in Vancouver and probably shouldn’t even have been out there to begin with! But she wanted to try, and she made it almost twenty-five kilometers before the pain got to be too much. She’s at the race brunch this morning if you’re wondering why she isn’t here.)

The imperative to choose life depends upon keeping the goal in mind.

As you likely know, the people of Israel had a bit of a mixed record with Moses’ command to choose life. They were not always obedient in the land the Lord gave to them. They weren’t always able to resist the lure of temptation. Their kingdom ended up fragmenting via a series of conquests from other nations.

They weren’t able to keep the vision of the end—a people set apart to be holy, to be a light to the Gentiles—in front of them.

But the choice Moses put to them on the threshold of Canaan is the same question that is put to each human being.

Will we choose the path that leads to life or the path that leads to death?

Will we choose the path of life even when it’s hard, even when it doesn’t seem to be leading to the kinds of blessings that we want or expect?

“Choose life” can sound kind of trite, I know. It is one of those expressions that probably plays better on Pinterest than it does when the burdens of life seem unbearable.

But I think it expresses a deep and important truth about the dignity of being human. We can rise above our circumstances. We can refuse the final victory to those things that can so easily pull us under.

We can choose how we will be in the world. Among all of God's creatures, this is a gift and a task given only to us.

In the section immediately before today's OT reading from Deuteronomy, we read these words:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

And what is that word that is in our mouths and in our hearts?

Well, the word is love. Moses made it clear, the command was to love God and to walk in his ways. This is echoed throughout Scripture and ultimately by Jesus himself who said that all the law in the prophets were summed up in the commands to love God and neighbour.

And to choose life is, in the end, to choose Jesus. We see this more clearly than Moses and the Israelites did on the doorstep of Canaan.

We are heirs to the fulfillment of all of God's promises which are fulfilled in Jesus. We are witnesses to the self-giving love and forgiveness demonstrated on Calvary's cross.

We have seen the truest picture of God that we will ever see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and we have been invited to follow his example. We have been summoned to the upside-down kingdom where last are first, weak are strong, foolish are wise, and suffering are victorious.

We have been given the gift of a faith, hope, and love that are stronger even than death.

For the Christian, "Choose life" is not a Hallmark slogan or a bit of inspirational kitsch. It is a reminder that the life we are called to daily choose is the life modeled by Jesus, and the life that his presence within us makes possible.

So choose life. Every day. When the blessings it leads to are obvious and when they are not. When it “works” and when it doesn’t seem to. When it seems to make sense and when it seems to be like pushing a rock up a hill.

Choose life. Keep running the race. The life we’re called to isn’t some impossible thing that we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea to find.

It’s the life that we were created for. It’s the way of being human that leads to peace and flourishing. It’s the life that, even though it must go through suffering and death, leads to life eternal.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

