

Choices, Choices

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Sermon for the People of God at Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, TX

Sunday, February 12, 2017

Choices. We all make choices every day. Which shoes to put on, what color tie perfectly goes with my shirt, whether to brush my teeth now or after that shower I may or may not take...we all have choices to make. The ability to make a choice regarding this person or thing or that situation is the reality that I have power over something. We all do well to be empowered to make choices.

In our passage today from the book of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are faced with a choice. Moses is nearing the end of his life and ministry, and he gives one final sermon to the people of Israel before designating Joshua as his successor. And he tells the people, make a choice. Life and prosperity. Death and adversity. Life. And death. Blessings. And curses.

It seems clear-cut, right? Do what you are told to do. Obey the LORD your God. Follow the commandments of the Law, and you will be blessed. On the other hand, if you do not do these things, but turn away to worship other gods, you shall surely die.

Does this not sort of sound like the Garden of Eden? Think about it. There, in the presence of the fullness of God in Creation, Nature at its finest, there are trees all around, and God says you may eat from all of them, except this one. We know the rest of the story: the serpent tempts Eve, while Adam is standing silently by, waiting for his turn though he knows it is the wrong thing to do, then Eve hands the fruit to Adam, and he partakes. And there - suddenly

- the world has changed. In one moment, with the making of one choice, all of history shall never be the same.

[Pause.]

Sometimes in our world, choices are made on our behalf. Indeed, there are those in our world who have no power to make choices. What of them?

Children silenced by the woes of poverty, their only choice being whether to fight their siblings for the next morsel of food that falls to the ground at the marketplace. Expectant mothers being mistreated and surviving somehow without the necessities of life like love and acceptance, their only choice being whether to keep silent or die. Students who have come to our country to study in order to better the world both here and abroad, their only choice being whether to fight the system or to leave when they are told. Choices. Choices...

Choices look different for different people.

In thinking about this passage, I went to www.newyorktimes.com and typed in the search bar the word “choice.” I was curious, you know, what is going on in our world regarding the choices that we make. Well, needless to say, the word choice is even more politically charged than I originally thought.

I also went to www.google.com and typed in the search bar the word “choice,” and after I scrolled through some random businesses like Choice Hotels and what-not, I came to the Wikipedia page called “choice.” This, I thought, will contain a gem.

So I scrolled through the Wikipedia page and skimmed here and there, until my eyes landed on the words, “choice overload.” There is an entire Wikipedia page devoted to the idea of choice overload!

Is it just me, or are we exhausted? And I don't mean by the existence of many choices, because we all know that is a privileged place to be. You know, first-world-problems kind of stuff. What I mean is, are we not exhausted from all the decisions we have to make, plus all the decisions that are made on our behalf, plus the fact that our decisions impact those around us, whether we see it or not...Choices. Choices.

Here, in our text from Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are faced with a choice. Choose life, or choose death. Do they get it right?

I don't think so.

If you know your Bible history, which I know you do, this is not the first time, and it is definitely not the last time, that this sort of interaction is had with the people. We've seen it in the Garden, we see it here in Deuteronomy, and we will see it again throughout biblical history, even as the story pours over into the book of Joshua, while the Israelites await the crossing of the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. God continually renews the covenant with Israel because they keep sinning and going after other gods, breaking their promise that they will follow God all the days of their lives.

So, you'd think that if God had tried this thing before in the Garden, before anyone had even sinned or knew they had to make choices or any of that, then God should be able to know how this one will end as well. History repeats itself, right? So, God, if we failed at it big time in the Garden, before we even knew we were naked, what makes you think that we can get it right this time?

Here we see the ridiculousness of our God. Yes, here we see that God is not afraid to let God's people get it wrong. Moses, their leader, puts before them a choice. Life or death. Blessings or curses. Whichever one they choose this day, tomorrow or the day after or the day

after that, or somewhere along the line they are going to mess up again, and they will end up right back at the drawing board, hoping, praying, begging that God has not run out of patience and they have not run out of chances to once again renew the covenant that they indeed are God's people and will follow what God says.

So, if God is not afraid to keep renewing this thing with the people of Israel, what makes you think that God is not willing to keep renewing this thing with you? With me? With us?

[Pause.]

In my schooling, I am working toward finishing my Master of Divinity and beginning my Master of Social Work. I was informed upon my acceptance to the Baylor School of Social Work that I was insufficient in one area. I had not taken a Statistics course in my undergraduate work, and I would be required to do so before I would be fully allowed into the Social Work program. So, long story short, I find myself this semester in an online "Elementary Statistics" course, and let me tell you, there is nothing "elementary" about statistics, at least not for me.

When we do our homework, it presents the problem or the question, and we must either select or fill in the answer. There are usually multiple parts to the question, so if we do not get every single part correct, we do not get full credit for that question. But, we are given unlimited attempts at answering each question.

Ugh, now this messes with my obsessive compulsiveness, right? I absolutely cannot accept less than a 100% on this homework, *because* no matter how many tries it takes me, this online program will give me chance after chance to get the problem right, and once I finally get it right, then I can proceed to the next problem.

Now, am I saying that God is like my online Statistics course homework program? Not exactly. But, in some ways, maybe? I mean, you see what I'm getting at, right? So God sets

before us a choice, life or death, blessings or curses, and no matter how many times we enter the wrong equation, God will keep giving us second chances until we get it right. It's biblical!

But wait. What if God is less like a statistics homework problem and more like, I don't know, real life? What would happen to us if God decided to stop renewing the covenant and just fulfill what God has said will happen when we disobey? There are definitely areas in our world where that seems to have happened. We can't explain the suffering and the evil, so it must be that somewhere, someone disobeyed, but good golly, it couldn't have been us! No way.

What if God is less worried about us getting the "problem" right and more concerned about our faith?

What if God is less concerned about the business-like interaction where we confess our sins, plead the case of the cross, and move on with our lives as though nothing ever happened, and what if God is more concerned that we are transformed by the cross? What if God is less concerned about us trying and trying again until we get it all 100% correct, and God just says, my goodness child, come as you are? What if the choice, after all, is less about us being the faithful people we know we need to be and more about us confessing that this is a choice that is way too big a burden for us to bear?

We can't get it right all the time. And perhaps that is not the point. Perhaps the point of my online statistics course is not about me making a 100% all the time, but instead about me learning useful skills that I can take into the world and use to make a difference. Perhaps the point of Moses' charge to the people on this day speaks to us in a way that maybe even the Israelites didn't understand. Perhaps what Moses is telling the people is not fully capturing the heart of God for God's people, because while Moses commands them to choose this day, God's actions show that we must choose everyday. Perhaps the point of what God wants us to know is

what God shows us throughout all the history of the Israelites, and that is that God is a faithful God, regardless of where our faith lies.

Oh, so you want to believe in Baal, the storm god. Oh, so you want to believe in Tiamat or El, or whomever you want to credit with My work. Ok, I'm still going to be faithful.

You turn away from worshipping me because you are weary and Yahweh doesn't always give you what you want, so your faith wavers, and you aren't sure who you believe anymore. Ok, I'm still going to be faithful.

You will eventually find yourselves as exiles in a foreign land because of this or that choice, or because something far outside your power chooses for you. Ok, I'm still going to be faithful.

You forget your song, and you no longer know who or whose you are in a world that is tainted by sin and evil and oppression and hatred, and you are terrified. Ok, I'm still going to be faithful.

[Pause.]

Oh, how quickly we forget that our story is so much like that of the Israelites. We forget that they faced some of the same challenges that we face in our world today. We make choices that end us in a tough place. Choices are made on our behalf that leave us in a tough place. Things happen, whether within or without our control, and yet, God says, Ok, I'm still going to be faithful.

This world is full of things that can cause our faith to waver, some things that have been caused by our choices and some that are outside our ability to choose. There is hunger and sickness and big, tall walls and hard hearts and guns and violence and bloodshed and hatred and

fear and death and mourning and a million other things that could cause us to fall to our knees from the weight of it all.

But, beloved children of God, these things are not the only parts of our story. Let us not forget that, whether we have the power to make choices regarding this and that or not, we serve a God who is still faithful.

What will that faithfulness look like? I don't know. Sometimes it might even seem like absence. But we have the promise, dear ones, the example set by God's own self, that no matter how many times we fall down or get distracted or run away from the commitment, God is still going to be faithful to God's people. God will continue to renew the covenant with us, again and again, because God knows how much we and the rest of the world need it.

So here God sets before us a choice, a choice like every other choice and yet unlike any other choice we've ever made. In this day, in this hour, choose life or choose death.

Now, I have never learned Hebrew, so I do not know how to check that, but in the English it seems pretty fair to say that here God is not speaking to one person. You, the person with the red scarf and the bright white hat, choose life. You, the person in all black and a dashing sparkle of gold, choose death. No, that's not how it works.

So what, then, does it mean for God to speak to us as a body of believers? What does it mean for God to say, hey y'all, you have a choice to make. Choose life.

What does it mean for us as a community of faith to walk in the choice of life?

Well, it seems like it is filled with promise. Moses says that if you choose to follow God properly, you will find life and prosperity and blessings. Otherwise, you will perish. Easy, right?

Except when life proves otherwise. In our politically-charged, difficult, and sometimes downright terrifying world, what does it mean to follow God and choose God above all else?

Perhaps it looks something like working toward the betterment of all people, not just the upper class, and then resting assured that the Kingdom of God is bigger than you and me.

Perhaps it looks a little more like welcoming in the stranger and the foreigner, because you know, that's biblical too.

Perhaps it looks like coming together and saying, you know, we have known what it is like to live in both life and in death. Today, even today, we will choose life, both for ourselves and for our world.

Maybe it looks like gathering together to cook a meal for someone who can't leave his or her home.

Maybe it looks like using your knitting or crocheting skills to create a prayer shawl for someone who needs to be surrounded by the love of God.

Maybe it looks like reaching out to others in our Waco community who are already busy with God, bringing about God's Kingdom on earth.

Whatever it looks like for this faith community, may we have the strength and the grace to carry it out, to live in freedom and blessing, to choose life, even in the face of death. May we hear the voice of God, who calls us Beloved, and may we hear God saying to us, this day, even this day, choose life. Amen.