

Lake Shore Baptist Church
Sermon February 16, 2020: Charlie Fuller

Title: *What Does It Really Mean to Hear?*

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Do you remember this one? Paper or plastic? Here are some more: streaming or cable? iPhone, Galaxy, or Pixel? Fries or chips? Small, medium, or large? Private school, charter, or traditional? Democrat, Republican, or Independent?

Cindy and I got a dog this weekend. We hadn't been to a pet store in about ten years. The number of choices was overwhelming. All this makes "Coke" or "Pepsi" seem pretty quaint.

In today's text God gives us another one: "life and prosperity or death and adversity."

These words come from the book we call Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is not usually one of our "go to" books of the Bible. It's not light reading. It's not a story like Genesis. It's not a letter like what Paul gave us. It's not the journey of Jesus, like the gospels. It's pretty *thick* stuff. It takes some chewing to get it swallowed.

Deuteronomy means literally, "second law." But it's not so much a second law as it is a reiteration of Moses law, an explanation, an expansion. It was written to a people who were struggling to find the way of God and it reflects their experience. It's what the writer felt important to give them to guide them as a chosen people. They needed to hear again the covenant with God and learn how to live it out. That was no small thing *then* just as it's no small thing *now*.

This part of Deuteronomy is a part of Moses's last advice to the Israelites as he prepares to die and as they prepare to enter the promised land. It's his last chance to give them direction before he goes home to God. It's sort of like his last will and testament, certainly his parting words.

The text is pretty explicit:

30:15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

30:16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

30:17 *But* if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,

30:18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

That's pretty clear cut, isn't it? You can choose life or you can choose death. It's like going to the eye doctor. Which is better? A? or B? Now which? A? or B? Life? or death?

This idea is deep in the Hebrew experience and it's found throughout Deuteronomy. Just last Sunday as a part of Elias Hinojosa's dedication service we read the words commonly referred to as the *Shema*, which are found in Deuteronomy 6:

6 Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ² so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These are important words to Jewish people even today. When I was in Israel I saw the leather boxes that Orthodox rabbis used to hold these Scriptures on their foreheads. I also saw all over the country little boxes on doorposts in which these words were also posted. They take these words seriously.

As should we. But with proper reflection.

At least a part of what we're talking about here it seems to me is sin. Here's my definition of sin: Sin is an act, behavior, thought, or attitude that in some way separates us from God. There are sins of commission and sins of omission. Sin is not just a list of do's and don'ts. For example, the Ten Commandments are foundational not just as a list, but as an illustration of the kinds of things that separate us from God. It's not prescriptive; it's descriptive.

Sin is either an active or a passive choice to avoid God.

Many of the Old Testament writers saw sin as a mathematical equation. You sin, you bear the consequences. Clear cut. Always the same. You do the crime, you pay the time. It's called retributive justice. Retribution. You get what you pay for.

Scripture is clear that sin leads to death. Sin has consequences, but they are not always specific and they're not always guaranteed. You can smoke cigarettes for 40 years and you'll likely develop lung cancer. But not always. You can run a traffic signal and have a wreck. But not always.

Deuteronomy is not wrong about working to make good choices. But making good choices is not a *guarantee* of prosperity.

Other biblical writers sought to acknowledge this. See the Book of Job. Calamities of all kinds rained down on Job, but Job "was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil." Yet Job lost his family, his prosperity, and even his health. The writers of Job were pushing back on Deuteronomy, pushing back on retributive justice. They already had seen what Jesus describes in Matthew: that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45)

So, how do we know what to do? How do we make choices in a world without guarantees? A world in which the rain falls on both the just and the unjust?

God's text this morning says this: "But if your heart turns away and you **do not hear...**"

What does it mean to hear? To actually hear. Not just the sounds and letters. What does it mean to hear deeply, to hear in a way that can transform one's life, to hear in the depths of one's soul, to hear in a way that will lead you from death to life, from less adversity toward more prosperity (at least as defined by faith).

There are several experts on listening in our community, people who are both trained and experienced in the kind of listening I'm talking about, people more qualified than I to try to explain what it means to truly listen. But I've had a little training, so let me make a short stab at it.

To truly listen is to actually draw alongside that person, to empathize deeply with their experience, to hear the deeper meaning of what's being said, to hear both between and below the lines.

A person who is truly listening doesn't spend the time the other person is talking simply planning what they will say next. They're not just waiting for their turn to talk. Interrupting is not usually a sign that someone is listening deeply. It's more than just hearing their words and deciding what part of your story might fit their story. It's deciding how you can learn more and more about *their* story. Deep listening is a stance

of curiosity, of trying to put yourself in *their* shoes, not expound about what it's like to live in your own shoes.

To listen deeply is to truly put the other person first. An author I deeply respect who writes about pastoral counseling says that to listen deeply is to give the other person a gift. That gift is control of the conversation, to let your conversation partner take the conversation wherever they want. It's a gift from the listener to the partner, a holy gift, a sacrificial gift, a Christ-like gift.

And it's a gift we can all give each other.

What if we give that same gift to God? What if we worked to truly listen to God?

How can we let God control the conversation?

How can we stop spending our time with God simply thinking of what we will say next?

How can we slow the noise in our hearts and minds long enough to hear what God has to say?

To let God do what God wants to do? Which is to steer us away from death and toward life?

How can we more deeply listen to today's text? How can we choose life and prosperity over death and adversity?

Your former pastor Brett Younger says, "We choose death when we ignore God and choose anything inferior. Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter."

I see life as the opposite. *Life is the daily decision to give ourselves up to things that truly matter.* Here are some of Brett's examples: "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Give to the poor. Fight for justice. Care for the hurting. Treat others fairly. Learn things you never thought you'd learn. Enjoy simple things. Play with children. Laugh often, long, and loud. Cry when it is time to cry. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others. Surround yourself with what you love – whether it is family, friends, pets, music, nature, or silence."

Let's take a trip. Let's go over to the Farrell Center on the Baylor campus. And let's go on an off day, a day when the Lady Bears don't have a game. Let's walk up to the door and go on in. Let's walk into the arena and take a seat. Let's do this during a Lady Bears practice. We'll see lots of movement, girls stretching, doing drills, practicing plays, dividing into teams to scrimmage.

We'll hear lots of basketballs bouncing over and over on the beautiful wooden gym floor. But do you know what we won't hear? Whistles. A typical basketball practice is marked by endless whistles getting the players attention, whistles marking the end of one drill and the beginning of another, whistles stopping play for the coach to give instruction.

I've been told that you won't hear that in a Kim Mulkey practice. No whistles. None at all. I've been told that Kim Mulkey doesn't use a whistle because she wants her players to hear her voice over and over in practice, to be able to identify it without thinking in any kind of game context. To hear her voice no matter how loud the gym is, no matter what kind of in-game chaos in which they find themselves.

They listen that way every day in practice. Practices without whistles.

She wants them to hear her voice above all others.

Some stories preach themselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.