

“What will you choose?” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
February 12, 2017 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Choose. As Americans, we like to choose. Do you want fries with that? Would you like to supersize your order? Yes, we like to choose. It seems that any place we go we're given a choice. How would you like to pay – credit, debit, Apple pay or cash? Some of us may just want to order a cup of coffee! I'm not sure that's possible in some coffee shops. But, yes, we like choices whether we want the options or not!

Yet, when you heard me read these words from Moses recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, were you a bit uncomfortable? Was Moses really offering the Hebrew people a choice? Or was it an ultimatum?

Let's look briefly at the background for this scripture selection I read today. The book of Deuteronomy is a very long sermon by Moses to the Hebrew people who were on the banks of the Jordan River ready to cross over into the Promised Land.

I said Moses gave a very long sermon. Thirty chapters of this book of the Bible record Moses words to the Hebrew people. That may be reason enough to consider choosing death when most people can't sit still and pay attention for a 20-minute sermon!

But seriously, Moses is about to die. The people have been in the wilderness for 40 years. Life was about to change for the Hebrew people. They would no longer be eating the manna and quail that God provided. They would be in the land flowing with milk and honey. Life would be easier and the Hebrew people would encounter the gods, the idols, of the people they would have to conquer to take possession of the land. Would the Hebrew people stay true to God or stray to other gods when life became easier? Moses' sermon recaps all God has done for them and then presents the question – choose life or choose death.

I asked, just a moment ago, what makes you feel uncomfortable about these verses – with the choice Moses presents to the Hebrew people? We all want to live, but we all want to live on our terms. We like the choices we're presented with in our society today. We like to select what makes us happy.

Perhaps we're uncomfortable when we read these verses because we're just not sure what God is asking of us. Or perhaps we're uncomfortable because we feel we'd lose control of our lives when we do as God tells us. We may just be quite comfortable the way things are and don't want to upset the status quo.

So, what does it really mean to choose life or to choose death?

I have a friend who has chosen life with God and is working through the messy, life-long process of living a life faithful to God's commands. Yet, his family doesn't see choosing life, accepting God, as a lifelong process. They believe choosing God is a one-time decision and that is all that matters. They seem to forget that life goes on after you choose God and growing in faith is a life-long process that can be quite messy.

The Hebrew people did chose God, but life got quite messy for them. All was not smooth sailing. The Old Testament provides story after story of the Hebrew people straying, of them recommitting themselves to serving God and of God taking them back. They deserted God for other gods; the idols of the peoples they conquered or encountered. God warned them through the prophets and punished God's wayward people, but God always took them back. That's God's grace, God's loving forgiveness.

So, what does it really mean to choose life or to choose death?

When you choose life, you choose to love God. Love is not a one-time emotion, but our relationship, our love of God may be compared to a long-term relationship. In a long-term relationship, you love the person beyond the physical and emotional. As your love matures, your relationship becomes a holistic commitment to the other person. Though not a direct comparison, that comparison may give you a glimpse of what it's like to mature in your love for God.

When you choose life, you follow God's ways and listen for God's voice. The longer I'm alive, the more I realize the value of mentoring. Students learn from watching. The best teachers are described as mentoring. Students want to be like that teacher. It's not about the book learning required for the grade. It's about how the teacher's behavior affects the student's life. Likewise, by following in God's ways and listening to God's voice we are being mentored in this love relationship, this relationship that provides life.

When you choose life, you follow God's rules. You act in appropriate ways – the ways you see your mentor act. Following rules provides the order that allows you to grow in your faith. The commands are not burdensome, but provide the means to remain faithful to God, to mark who you are in Christ.

Moses summarized these three points in verse 20: **loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him.** To choose life means loving God, listening to God's voice, and obeying God's commandments.

As I mentioned, the Hebrew people didn't always do a great job of loving, obeying and listening to God. Idols got in the way. Last week we read that the rules of worship became an idol for the Hebrew people. The Hebrew people were so tied up with making worship their idol that they forgot God wanted them to take care of the poor, the homeless, the hungry.

What is it that distracts you from maintaining your relationship with God? Even though you say that you worship the one true God, does your life suggest otherwise? What are the idols in your life? Some folks make idols out of politicians or political philosophies. Some people are distracted by the latest technology. Many of us spend hours each day tied to our smartphone. Smartphones can become our idols – many people certainly look like they are bowing down to their smartphones!

In church, we can become like the Hebrew people and their worship. We may idolize the way we worship or we may idolize a particular religious leader. Our mistaken beliefs may prevent us from truly loving God and following his command to love your neighbor as yourself.

So, what does it really mean to choose life or to choose death?

What happens when we stray from God, if we don't love and obey God? If we choose death? Moses mentions curses. Curses can be personal. Marriage promises not kept are destructive to the relationship. Secrets kept can cause families to self-destruct and the secret can haunt generation after generation. Irresponsible financial decisions can bring curses.

But curses can also be community-wide. If profit is the motivation, then the poor may suffer. Our desire for the latest and greatest can lead to damage to the environment, God's creation. If we serve fear, instead of God, both we and our neighbor suffer.

If we take Moses up on the offer to serve God alone and let God guide our journey through life, we and the community in which we live, will be blessed. If we choose otherwise, we face both spiritual and physical death.

Choose life or choose death. The Hebrew people strayed. What can we do to help us stay on track with loving, obeying and listening to God? You may remember that the Hebrew people recommitted themselves to God at the end of the book of Joshua. The first time was with Moses, the verses we just read. The second was with Joshua after the Promised Land had been conquered.

Like the Hebrew people, you and I need regular moments of recommitting, of returning, of reorienting our lives to God. As many of you know, I work at a spiritual renewal weekend for men. The men who attend these weekends are leaders in their churches. They are committed to God and come to the weekend to learn more about serving God and how to grow in their Christian faith. At the weekend, there is a time for quiet, reflective prayer, for the men to examine their faith and their walk with God. Every weekend one or two of the men come to me or the other pastors on the weekend wanting to recommit their lives to Christ. Their stories are the same. They have strayed and need to get back on track.

All of us can learn a lesson from these men. We need to continually recommit ourselves, our orientation, to God. Weekly worship can help to remind us of whose we are. Working on church outreach projects. Studying the Bible. Daily prayer and meditation. All of these can help us keep our focus on God and keep us from straying.

Chose life or chose death. Our choices have lasting effects. Not only do our choices touch the world and community in which we live, but our choices determine the future for our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. Deuteronomy 30: 19 - **Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.**

One of my friends tells this story about himself. He was not a Christian. He lived for himself. He ran a successful business for the family, one of the many his family owned. He had all the creature comforts of life. Profit was his life's idol and motivator. Being successful was his goal. Christianity wasn't on his radar. His wife had recently become a Christian and he didn't want any part of this silly Christian thing.

He was at a conference with several of his staff. He says he was drinking and enjoying the evening at what he calls a house of ill repute. I leave that one to your imagination. The music was loud and everyone was drinking and engaged in conversation when he distinctly heard a voice say: "Raphael, Raphael, choose life or choose death." It startled him and he asked the guys sitting near him if they heard that voice. Everyone looked at him strangely thinking to themselves that he has had more than enough to drink. So my friend went back to drinking and partying when the voice came again: "Raphael, Raphael, choose life or choose death." The second time he heard the voice, he was scared. All he wanted to do was get out of that place and go home. He took a cab back to the hotel, packed his bag, went to the airport and caught the last plane back to his home town.

He arrived home around two in the morning. His wife met him at the door. She had tear stained eyes. She told him she had been on the floor all night long intensely praying for him. She knew something was wrong. He told her the story of the voice: "Raphael, Raphael, choose life or choose death."

My friend chose life. He chose to love God, to follow God's ways, listen to God's voice and to follow God's rules. Where did that lead him? He became a Christian, was disowned by the family and forced out of the family business, and became a pastor. He chose life. And he continues to say he's happier for choosing life.

That decision had future family ramifications as well. All three of his children and their spouses are strong Christians. All of the grandchildren are also Christ-followers.

**Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.** (verses 19-20)