

Life's Choices
Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This morning's reading is a joyous conclusion to a story that began hundreds of years before, when God promised Abraham and Sarah, the old couple, to leave their home and go to a place where God would make of them and their offspring a great nation. You remember how the story goes, don't you? Eventually Abraham and Sarah have a child in their 90's and they name him Isaac, who later had sons of his own, the first being Jacob. Then Jacob was very prodigious, having 12 sons, one of whom was Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his 11 older brothers. You will also remember that Joseph went to Egypt, where he was loved by Pharaoh, and Joseph helped Egypt avoid calamity by stockpiling food in the event of a famine.

You will also remember how Joseph's brothers went to Egypt for food, and they were met by their now grown up brother, who forgave them and invited them all to come and live in Egypt. Eventually they would die of old age living in the land of Egypt, and the Jewish people multiplied and became strong and industrious. Feeling threatened, the new king of Egypt decided to slaughter all of the newborn babies born to Jewish women, but one baby, later named Moses, was placed in a basket, floated down the river, and was rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him and Moses' mother was allowed to raise him.

As the Jewish people suffered from the oppression of slavery, God heard their cries of pain and agony. God summoned Moses, a young and stuttering shepherd, to liberate the children of God, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Eventually God would lead them across the Red Sea, parting the waters so Moses and the Israelites could escape their captors.

For 40 years this band of renegades wandered through the desert. Even though the people desired to worship golden calves and other idols they had known while in Egypt, God loved them and wanted to be their God, and they could be God's people. God gave the people the 10 commandments, not as a means of punishment, but as rules they could follow and prosper and become a great nation. Finally, God was ready to take the Israelites into the land, their own country.

As Moses stands at the threshold of the new kingdom, he gives his last words of instruction. "Look at what I've done for you today: I've placed in front of you Life and Death, Good and Evil. And I command you today: Love GOD. Walk in his ways. Keep his commandments, regulations, and rules so that you will live, blessed by GOD, in the land you are about to enter and possess. But I warn you: If you have a change of heart, refuse to listen obediently, and willfully go off to serve and

worship other gods, you will most certainly die. You won't last long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you today: I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse. Choose life so that you and your children will live.

These are the words of a dying man who had lived life to its fullest, and he wanted to encourage his children to follow the instructions that God had given to them so that they could fully live. If they loved God and obeyed his commandments, they would flourish, not just as individuals, but as a nation. They would prosper and live lives of great joy and blessing if they chose to follow God, who had liberated them from slavery and was about to lead them into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

They could make another choice however. They could choose to go their own way, make up their own rules and laws, and follow any other God or no God at all. Moses had seen the people do just that. He turned his back on them for a moment so that he could climb a mountain and receive the stone tablets containing the 10 commandments, and by the time he came down from the mountain the people were running wild, dancing drunk around the golden calf they had built to worship. Yes, Moses knew that in his absence, all of the work that God had done for them could quickly be forgotten by the people and they might abandon the God of their ancestors who had liberated them from bondage and was now ready to lead them into the land of promise.

I doubt that any of us here have a golden cow at home that we worship, but I do suspect that all of us have things that we idolize or covet or prioritize over God's teachings, things such as money, success, big houses, the newest technologies, shopping, gambling, alcohol, or drugs. We all have our golden calf--things we think give us life and joy and sustenance. But Moses tells us that these things do not lead to life. In fact they can lead to destruction.

Idols can be powerful things. If we worship money, for example, we become greedy. If we worship power, we can become corrupt. If we worship another person, we can become co-dependent. As Ralph Waldo Emerson explained, "That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our life and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

So what is life? Moses answers in verse 20: "Loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you."

It makes sense, as God is the life force for all of us. This became a personal example for me recently when I lost power in my office at the church on a cold, bleak New England day. The lights went off, my computer went off, my space heater went off; and all of a sudden, there I was, by myself, in a cold, dark, lonely space. It took a few minutes, but finally the power came back on and warmth, and light and connection flowed in. I realized in that moment that God is like that electrical connection--available to us anytime--but if the connection gets broken, things quickly become dark and cold.

Many of us have found ourselves in those dark places, blaming God for abandoning us; but, in fact, we are the ones who disconnected. It's like the old saying: If God feels far away, who moved? God is the power source and we are the cord, the connection. We can choose to have faith and plug into this ultimate life force, or we can choose to plug into things of the world, which have no power--things that will leave us in a dark, cold space.

If you are finding that your life is becoming unmanageable, or you are feeling spiritually empty and alone, let me suggest a simple three step prayer to get your life back on track. First, give God thanks for life; second, name the things that block you from God's life-giving power; and third, ask for help in giving those things up.

Granted, we may not be able to give them up right away. We will make mistakes, poor choices, continue to fall from God. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail." Moses is saying pick yourself up, turn your faith toward your ultimate power source, your God.

Today, what things are blocking you from God's powerful life force? More importantly, are you willing to let those things go?

At the end of his sermon, Moses summoned Joshua and spoke the following words, words which not only empowered his people, but reach through the ages to inspire us today: "Be strong and bold...for you will go with the people into their land; it is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; He will not fail you or forsake you.

The promise land is waiting, so choose life!