

“ITS NOT A HARD CHOICE”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

February 12, 2023

“The Easiest decision in the history of decisions” is the tagline for a series of recent commercials by Capital One Bank. The spokesperson tells us, **“With no fees or overdraft fees, banking with Capital One is the easiest decision in the history of decisions. Even easier than this.”** The commercial cuts away to a guitar audition taking place in an old warehouse. A celebrity guitarist is playing effortlessly while the other competitors are on the couch hanging their heads in defeat. Just as a side note, for those of you unfamiliar with hard rock, **Slash** is the celebrity guitarist and is considered one of the best of all time. His style is unmistakable, and if you lived the golden years of Guns N' Roses, you would have recognized him immediately.

Celebrity aside, the obvious message of the commercial is that the decision to do your banking with Capital One Bank is a no brainer. You don't have to spend time thinking about it. Just sign up and all your banking worries go away. Yeah Right!

Regardless, of where you do your banking, I do agree there are some decisions in life that are easier to make than others. Which team you're hoping to win the Super Bowl, how much hot fudge you want on your ice cream sundae, and what color of socks to wear this morning are decisions that just can't be compared to the decisions about who to marry, what major to take in college, and what to name your child. These latter decisions are tougher to make because they have a greater impact on our lives in terms of both breadth and longevity. We discover such a decision in our scripture passage this morning.

The book of Deuteronomy closes with the death of Moses and the transfer of leadership to Joshua. But, before Moses walks into the sunset, he gives a grand speech to the gathered people of Israel. After spending 40 years in the desert, after watching almost all the original exodus people die off and new generations rise, they have finally arrived. They are on the verge of crossing over the Jordan River to take possession of the promised land. The Israelites are about to start a new life, in a new land, with a new leader. It is momentous occasion, a turning point in their history, filled with the excitement of new opportunities and a certain amount of anxiety for the unknown.

Before they take another step, Moses tells the people you've got an important decision to make, the most important decision of your life. What you decide today will affect you and your children's and your grandchildren's futures forever. **“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death, and adversity. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before life and death, blessings, and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”** When life and death are on the line, we sit up and pay attention. We know this is not a trivial decision. It is a critical choice. In fact, Moses insists this was the primary choice upon which everything else in their lives depended. The choice they make, he says, changes everything! Being each of us makes this same decision it might help to know just what we are dealing with. What choice is Moses laying before the congregation and every congregation to follow?

I. UNDERSTANDING THE CHOICE

On one occasion during the Lewis and Clark expedition, 60 warriors, mounted on excellent horses and armed for war with bows and arrows plus three inferior rifles, came on at full speed at the expedition. When they saw Lewis's party, they halted. This was the first time Lewis' group had ever seen a Shoshone war party, and the first time this band of Shoshone had ever seen people like these strangers. The warriors were overwhelmingly superior. It would have been short work for them to overwhelm Lewis's party, and they would have more than doubled their firepower in rifles and gathered as loot more knives, awls, looking glasses and other trinkets than any Rocky Mountain Shoshone had ever seen.

But rather than fire, Lewis laid down his rifle, picked up his flag, told his party to stay in place and, following the old native woman who was guiding, advanced slowly toward he knew not what. A man Lewis assumed was the chief rode in the lead. He halted to speak to the old woman. She told him that these were white men "and exultingly shewed the presents which had been given." This broke the tension. The chief and then the warriors dismounted.

The chief advanced. Saying ... "I am much pleased, I am much rejoiced," the chief put his left arm over Lewis's right shoulder and applied his left cheek to Lewis's right cheek. The warriors and Lewis's men then came on, **"and we were all caressed and besmeared with their grease and paint till I was heartily tired of the national hug."**

Meriweather Lewis made an important choice that day, between peace and life, or aggression and death. Moses is telling the people there are two ways to live in this life, either with God and God's way or without God and God's way. God's way leads to life, prosperity, and blessing. The other way leads to death, adversity, and curses.

It's worth our time to note that the Hebrew word for "blessing," **berakah**, denotes the power of life to expand and flourish in all ways. Blessing is the idea behind shalom. There is some notion of that idea in all cultures, but in Israel, blessing is not "a sort of free-floating life force," says commentator Robert W. Jenson, but something "linked exclusively to the Lord."

Conversely, the Hebrew for "curse," **qelalah**, is a complete deprivation of blessing. It is enfeeblement. It is existence without the expansion and flourishing that is implied in blessing. It is to live apart from God.

Please note, Moses is not offering a prosperity gospel. He is not bribing the people with promises that if you follow God you will win the lottery and all your troubles disappear. Nor is he threatening the people with, if you don't follow God, you will get cancer. But to choose God means to create the possibilities for a good and blessed life. It means we are lining our lives up with the Divine action of the Creator and this choice effects our destiny.

So here the people are presented with a clear-cut choice, and there's no question about which direction Moses wants the people to go: **"Choose life,"** he says "

This seems like the easiest decision in the history of decisions. Who doesn't want life, blessings, and prosperity? Who in their right mind would choose death, curses, and adversity? I'll take door number one, thank you very much.

II. LIVING OUT THE CHOICE

But not so fast. There is more to it than this. Listen to Moses again, **"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, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."**

We all know that making the choice and living out our choices is not the same thing. It's one thing to decide to go and get into college. It's another thing to go to class, study, learn, write papers, pass tests, and do the work it takes to earn a degree. Moses is not promising the people an easy street in the new land. By the way, neither did Jesus. Remember he tells us to pick up our crosses. It's easy to say I choose God, and forget there is work to do if we are going to live into that reality.

Well, what is this work that comes with our choice to be God's people? Moses tells us.

First Duty is Love God – This is a choice of the will and emotion. This means we spend time with God, listen to God, learn to enjoy God until love for God becomes the motive for all we do. The choice is built on a relationship with God.

Second Duty is Obedience – People get the wrong idea about obedience as though it is something that diminishes us. Obedience is love lived out. It is putting our words into action. It's nice to be told we are loved, which is an action, but it's even better to be shown it.

To choose God is to commit to a particular way of life. It is a path that follows God's instructions, worships, purifies, promotes justice and fairness toward the poor and powerless, honors parents, respects neighbor, takes on leadership, and so forth. Basically, we are a force of good and a force for God in the world.

Third duty – is to Cleave or Hold Fast. This means we are to be consistent and persevere in our walk with God. The choice for God is a choice we make every day. It is nice to bring flowers to your wife on Valentine's Day, even better to bring flowers on non-holiday. To choose life is to choose it every day.

My stepfather was in AA for over 40 years. In order to stay sober, the participants need to work the AA program: get a sponsor, attend meetings, do the 12 steps, etc. When they do these things, they discover this practice is about more than just staying sober, it is a program for healthy, fruitful living and relationships.

The same could be said of the Church. This is not a social club. It is family that combines their skills to carry out God's mission to the world, to be peacemakers of wholeness, healing, reconciliation. And like AA, that won't happen unless we practice the program.

It's easy to say we choose God and God's way, but it takes work to live that choice out.

III. GOOD NEWS LOVE RELATIONSHIP

Lastly, if Moses' presentation of the either choosing God or not choosing God makes you a little uncomfortable, I'm there with you. Either-or decisions make me anxious. For instance, I hate high pressured sales tactics trying to get me to sign on the dotted line. Who wants to be locked into a cell phone or cable TV contract? That love for the new car

soon fades away when we realize there is a hefty monthly bill commitment for the next 5 years. Not to mention the insurance, upkeep, and weekly fill-up. It doesn't surprise me that so many people like the idea of leasing a car, even though it costs more in the long run.

Quite frankly we are a people who like to keep our options open, make choices according to the circumstances, have some kind of out clause, and be able to renegotiate when life changes. We don't like being backed into a corner. There are just too many gray areas. The truth is commitment frightens us. Fear of getting taken advantage of. Fear of missing out on something better. Fear we will regret our decision. Fear of getting hurt. Fear of loss. Fear of not knowing.

I imagine the Israelites were feeling some of these fears too. The only leader they knew was leaving, the life they knew was over, and they were venturing into an unknown land. It would not be easy and there were no guarantees. All they had was each other, a promise of blessing, and a life path. And when it boils right down to it, that's all we have too.

Eugene Peterson wrote, "Deuteronomy presents God in a loyal, committed relationship of love with his people. God is not a random thought. God is not a word to fill in the gaps of what we don't know. God is actively, energetically dealing with people in love. Love is the key and characteristic word in the book. This love is both God's character and his command. Because we are under this kind of God, there is no living worth the name that is not a participation in that love."

The good news is we have a choice to make because God made the first choice to choose us. We can either allow fear to paralyze all our decisions or trust the good news and respond to God's love. God isn't trying to take advantage of us or trick us. God is trying to bless us and use us to bless others. But we need to make a choice, a daily choice for God. Remember, not making a choice is a choice. We are the people who decide life. You know, that sounds like an easy choice to me. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley
Sunday, February 12, 2023
Second Scripture Lesson

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If 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. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.