

CHOOSING TO BLESS

Sermon, February 19, 2023

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Matthew 17:1-9

Thirty-three of the thirty-four chapters of the entire book of Deuteronomy were basically Moses' farewell address to the people he cared about and loved, people he had been on the desert road with for some forty years. They were now about to leave the wilderness and pass on into the Promised Land, but Moses would not be going with them. The entire first thirty-three chapters are his final words to them ... words he no doubt chose quite carefully, reviewing all that was important to remember regarding their four-decade saga. Deuteronomy is the fifth of the Books of Moses, the five books known as the Pentateuch or the Torah (*in fact, in German Bibles Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are called First Moses, Second Moses, Third Moses and so on.*) We can assume, though, that Moses probably did not write chapter 34, the last chapter of the five books of Moses, because it is the account of his death; it may have been written by Joshua. We pick up what is something of a theme summary verse of this thirty-three chapter sermon in chapter 30. "*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.*"

Moses had taken the Hebrew people as far as he could. Moses never enters the Promised Land towards which he had been leading these people these long years. The Bible does give us some answers as to why Moses was not allowed to enter the land, but that's really another sermon. They now stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, and Moses would not be going in with them. It had been forty years since they left slavery and journeyed through the wilderness learning to trust God every step along the way. And it's thirty-eight years after they first approached the border of the Promised Land, which we looked at last week. So, Moses is now giving his last sermon. Again, he never enters the Promised Land towards which he had been leading these people these long years, he will only get a glimpse in the distance of it. However, we do see that he does eventually enter the Promised Land ... in today's Gospel reading, on the Mount of Transfiguration. (*I've mentioned this on past Transfiguration Sundays, that in a way, this scene is a great pictorial summary of the whole Bible ... Moses representing the Law; Elijah representing the Prophets; and both conversing with Jesus in Whom and by Whom the Law and the Prophets find their complete fulfillment.*)

Moses' long earthly life is almost over and by this time he has seen quite a bit. He knew that the survival of this people was dependent, completely dependent, on the choices they made. If Moses had learned nothing else in his long life, he learned that God honors human choices, and that those human choices *matter*. Thirty-eight years have passed since last Sunday, when we read how Moses had stood at this same threshold, this same gate to the Promised Land, as recounted in Numbers 13-14. (*Coincidentally, 38 years is how long I've been in ordained ministry!*) But then the people made a bad choice. They voted not to enter the land because they were afraid; they had been told by ten of the twelve scouts that giants were in that land. To them, the giants were bigger than the promises of God, so they opted not to go in. So God honored their choice, a choice born out of fear and faithlessness, and let them wander in the desert until almost all of that adult generation died.

Moses is now preaching to their now-grown children. He tells this next generation that they face the same choice faced by their parents. And Moses cautions them to choose carefully. "*Don't choose fear, as did your parents. Fear is not a virtue! Choose life! Choose life that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord you God, listen to His voice and hold fast to Him.*" It is the only way out of the wilderness, the wilderness of lost hopes, the lonely wasteland of timidity and fearfulness, it is the only way to inherit God's great blessing for you. It may be a bit of a stretch, but thirty-eight years of ordained ministry experience has taught me, as thirty-eight years of wilderness ministry had apparently taught Moses, that just about *everything* in ministry can be summed up in the admonition and imperative to **boldly make good and godly choices**.

I think few words have been more politicized and propagandized than the word "choice." Choice *can* be wholesome and desirable; choice can also be mischievous and destructive ... it all depends on what is chosen. Interestingly, the Greek word for choice is "heresy;" we get our word *heresy* from it; the essence of heresy is wrong choice. We can (*and often do*) commit "heresy;" we can, and often do, choose poorly. However, God's will for us is that we make good and godly choices which lead to *life*, and that's why He says to us through Moses, "*I have set before you life and death ... therefore choose life, that you and your children may live!*" There are destructive choices and there are constructive choices. There are choices that

will make us and those who love us stronger and better, and there are choices that will wreak havoc in our lives and make us weaker and bitter. I think if we are honest with ourselves, in our heart of hearts, we really know for the most part what it is God wants us to do and not do ... we know what it is we must personally choose to do to make things right, we know what it is we must personally choose to do to live lives of integrity, we know what it is we must do to live godly and God-honoring lives of honor and faithfulness. We must choose, and choose well.

At the beginning of today's text, Moses says in so many words. *"What I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It's not hard to understand! It's not way up there in heaven that someone has to fly up there to get it for you, nor is it overseas that some expert has to come from thousands of miles away to make it accessible and/or explain it all to you ... the word is very near you; what has come from God's mouth is now by His grace in your mouth and in your heart so you may readily obey it and do it. Don't keep asking God what you are supposed to do or not do; I'm sure He's told you already! Don't keep avoiding your calling, don't keep putting off your responsibilities, don't keep making excuses for things you've done or left undone, don't keep putting off doing what you know to be right by claiming you don't know what the will of God is for your life! Love the Lord your God, walk in His ways, keep His commands, then you will live and increase and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering. I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Your choice!"* To paraphrase Don Corleone, this is a choice we really can't refuse.

The ability to choose is part and parcel of what it means to be made in the image of God; part and parcel of what it means to be a human being. Again, Moses goes on to conclude, *"Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."* For better or worse, God allows us to make choices, our own decisions. When God created us, He endowed us with the awesome gift ... and the great burden ... of being free and responsible. He chose NOT to make us mechanisms wholly obedient to His control, like so many video characters controlled by His divine joy stick in an X-Box world. Nor did He choose to make us just one more animal controlled and driven solely by creature passion and appetite. No, He endowed us with the awesome gift ... and the great burden ... of being free and responsible. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed to live a full and fulfilling life, which included the opportunity and dignity to make very real choices ... which was what that forbidden tree symbolized. Choice. Adam and Eve were given the choice to heed God's instructions and live forever in Paradise, to choose life not just for them, but for their offspring, their descendants; or, they could choose to eat of the forbidden tree and go on to die. And we know the story. They chose ... poorly (*to quote the Grail guardian knight from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*), and we their descendants have suffered ever since. I find it fascinating the five Books of Moses begin with a choice, and they end with a choice ... as if God is saying through Moses, *"Life or death. You pick."* Make the wrong choices, and destruction results. Make the right choices and you will live, you will prosper, you will be blessed, **and you will be a blessing to others.** The blessings are not just for you, but they are for you to be a blessing to others. And not just to others living right now.

Earlier in this lengthy sermon Moses had reiterated the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 5: 8-10 reads: *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."* I've made this observation when we looked at the Ten Commandments before, but we live in a time when people are just not encouraged to be future oriented. We tend live for the moment and think only of ourselves. We are prone to think little of the effect of our choices, our manner of living, on future generations, on how it will affect our children and our grandchildren. What we do matters; it does have an effect far beyond what we can even imagine. Do we grasp that what we are doing now, how we are living now, what we choose now, will affect our families and our loved ones and our friends and the lives they touch for generations to come? Generations! Do we understand that? That is true for every single person in this room! Our lives have a multi-generational impact for good or ill. Our lives all have a multigenerational impact on those around us and on their progeny. Do we see the potential impact of our choices? In His great mercy, God shows love, He shows mercy, unto a *thousand* ... of what, people? No, generations! He shows love to a *thousand generations* of those who love Him and keep His commandments. Generation after generation after generation after generation will reap the benefit of your godly choices to "let your light shine," as the choir sang earlier, and will in turn go on to be a blessing to others for generations to come. That's the divine vision. We are blessed to be a blessing.

"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." In short, choose to be a blessing. Amen.