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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

LIFE AND DEATH CHOICES

Moses has gathered his people before him and he gives them a choice: life or death. Pick one, he tells them. This sounds like something a terrorist might say to a hostage. But Moses wasn't holding a gun to their heads. But he knew that his people faced a dangerous situation in which this life or death choice was going to be required of them. The danger they faced was that they were about to enter the Promised Land. After escaping slavery, after wandering 40 years in the wilderness, the people now stood right on the very border of their new homeland. Here life would be good. Here life would be filled with plenty. Here they could prosper and settle down and know the good life. But here too lay a great danger. Moses understood the danger that this land of plenty and security could bring. Moses was worried that his people would forget to live in right relationship with God and that instead of life, they would know death.

Life or death? Which will we choose? Now, unless we are suicidal or perhaps enduring great physical pain, for most of us the choice is easy. We want life. But Moses was not talking about simply being *alive*, having your heart beat, your lungs fill with air, your brain sending out its signals to the body. Moses meant experiencing meaningful life. He meant knowing *shalom*--which meant wellbeing both personally as well as socially. He meant knowing a life that was rooted in something bigger than ourselves.

We say we want a meaningful life. But do we know what will give us this life? We spend a lot of our time trying to find or secure this kind of meaningful life--a life of happiness and fulfillment. We get married and have children thinking this will bring us a happy and meaningful life. We seek fulfillment in our careers, or in good health and exercise, or in taking

vacations and traveling all around the globe. A good many of us seek happiness in our possessions and in having secure incomes. Our homes and closets and garages and basements and attics are filled with the things we have acquired in pursuit of happiness or fulfillment. Until we notice that their affect wears off rather quickly. Until the next new and beautiful and interesting thing comes along. And this happy feeling is fleeting. And then we get cancer, or we lose our job, or our marriage falls apart, or our child becomes an alcoholic, or our spouse dies just as we were getting ready to retire and really enjoy life. And then, well, then, what happened to our meaningful, happy, purposeful life?

We want life, a meaningful life. But how do we get it? We don't always know how to choose the things that will make for true life. Because sometimes the things we think will bring us meaningful life, don't. They seem to offer happiness. But they don't end up doing that. Or it doesn't last long. Or in the end, they actually harm us.

This is what Moses was worried about. Specifically, he was worried about his people forgetting God and turning to worship other gods. This is called idolatry. Now, today we aren't likely to actually bow before a statue of some other deity. But our practices in life still suggest that we have loyalties other than God. We bow before our smart phones, and our bank accounts, and our consumer lifestyles. We offer our loyalties to the message of fear: fear of the stranger, fear for our security, fear of scarcity. There are those out there preaching that message and sometimes we buy into it with our hearts and minds and our practices. We may be tempted by the message of nationalism: that America must come first. And the idol of the self seems especially strong these days--that our personal wants, wishes, and desires take priority. As odd as it may seem, we have even created a god out of our despair. The sufferings of the world and of our own personal lives, the alienating and isolating aspects that come with our rapid

technological advancements, the unraveling of communal bonds, can lead us to embrace nihilism--the belief that life is meaningless. Sometimes it can be easier to believe that there is no loving God at all, that there is no point to our existence.

Moses declared that these other pathways lead to death, not life. If you recall, he said to his people, "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God . . . by walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and . . . the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish."

These are rather strong words, words easily given to misunderstanding and abuse. Here is what they do not mean. These words do not mean that if you break God's commandments, you will get struck by lightning and die, or get cancer and die. And they do not mean that if you keep God's laws you will win the lottery, get rich, have happiness in your marriage and perfect children. This conversation about life and death is deeper and richer than these kinds of interpretations.

Moses is clear that the choice regarding whom we will serve really matters. What we choose makes a significant difference in the shape our lives will take. The choice we make shapes who we are, how we live, and the nature of our relationship with others. If we choose the path of self-centeredness, then we are at odds with others in our lives, our sense of our selves is warped, and our emotional wellbeing is going to be in turmoil. When we are a community that permits some to prosper while others suffer, that builds walls and fosters fear, then we will know divisions and violence and upheaval.

And conversely, the life lived in the covenant with God will bring about blessings and well being, but not as some kind of prize or reward heaped upon us for our good behavior, but as a consequence of our actions. This is because the very nature of God's laws, God's commandments, God's ordinances are not just about personal piety but are fundamentally about living in right relationship with others. The covenant we have with God is about loving and honoring God and loving and honoring our neighbor.

The book of Deuteronomy is filled with instructions from God to the people about how to live in right relationship with one another. Deut. 14 instructs the people to feed the hungry. Deut. 15 tells them to cancel the debts of the poor who cannot pay them. Deut. 24 talks about paying hired hands promptly what they are owed. Deut. 24 also instruct farmers to leave the residue of the harvest for the poor and disadvantaged. You see, the covenant God makes with us is integrally connected to our living in just and compassionate relationship with one another. We will perish outside of this covenant because we will be caught up in practices that generate fear, anger, hate, and divisions. We will prosper in this covenant because the very nature of the covenant ensures that our social relationships are honored and respected.

And while Moses is speaking to a community, I think his message has bearing upon us individually. Our individual lives know blessing and abundance and fulfillment when we live in this covenant of loving God and loving others. This does not mean we won't get cancer or have struggles, or know heartache, or have no financial worries. But it does mean that our quest for a life of meaning and purpose is found by orienting ourselves, our hearts as well as our lived out practices, toward loving God and loving others. It means that in the face of all the many kinds of deaths that exist out there in life and all the deathly options put before us each and every day, we will turn ourselves again and again toward the God of love and the God of life.