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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If 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. 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; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I 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, 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.

Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Choose Life

Sing: “To Life To Life L’Chaim” . No full voice today. When this sermon was just a little glimmer in my brain more than a week ago, I thought of this song from Fiddler on the Roof as the perfect explanation of “life” in the Hebrew sense. Unfortunately the virus stalking me last Sunday still is affecting my voice.

So instead of singing, I will afflict you with some of the gleanings of my sick day last Monday, the rumblings of an amateur anthropologist. Not feeling up to anything productive, I decided to finish my “for fun” book from the bedside, called “Cro-Magnon” by Brian Fagan. It’s about the demise of the Neanderthals, and the rise of that branch of Homo Sapiens who migrated into Europe and got stuck there during the last great Ice Age. In tens of thousands of years of being stuck, people used the ingenuity of their brains and language in a cooperative way to survive the harsh environment of that climate change. Spirituality and art were important aspects. Cultural and social history fascinates me.

Yesterday, I took a bright and beautiful walk around the human history and the natural environment at the foot of my window, the Winooski dam.

Besides physical evidence of the layers of cultures, there are four fascinating plaques about the story of human habitation: native Americans who settled here as long as ten thousand years ago to those here at the time of European settlement who came to gather wild onions that grow in the flat land below the falls, lending their name Winooski. And finally about

Ira Allen, Ethan's brother, who created the first of the mills at the turn of the 18th-19th century at the upper falls. The commerce-minded Europeans were descendants of those inventive Cro-Magnons, whose survival meant alteration and exploitation of the environment around them. Fascinating.

Flipping through my favorite weekend magazines on line (procrastinating as usual, on Saturday), I found another fascinating story of human settlement and survival. Cultural historians have long thought that slave maroon societies (those Africans escaping slavery and surviving in the wilderness) existed only in Central and South America, not in the North. But archeologist Dan Sayers dug up evidence of hidden slave societies on small islands in the middle of the "Great Swamp" straddling Virginia and North Carolina. Apparently the African branches of Homo Sapiens had as much opportunity to develop creative survival ability as the Cro Magnons. African descendants not only were able to escape from slavery but also to create their own cooperative societies out of nothing.

What a piece of work is man! (repeat with different emphasis)

First said by a Hebrew psalmist and later on by Shakespeare.

But I'm not here to be lecturer on cultural history so I'll switch to the Biblical focus. Let's pretend this lesson from Deuteronomy is a little bit of cultural history. Although to us the Old Testament seems very ancient, this writing is less than 3000 years old, more recent than those first Native Americans at Winooski Falls. 3000 years is less than half of 1% of the time period in which human beings have existed. Not so long ago...

The story is about the Hebrew slaves, who having wandered through the desert for forty years under Moses' leadership, are about to enter into the land of Canaan which God has promised them. Archaeologists and prehistorians have not been able to figure out what really happened: was it a military invasion or a cultural one? What happened to the people who had been living there before? Did the Hebrews stay distinct from earlier groups or intermarry? These questions are largely unanswered and the Bible is of minimal historical value. The prehistory written in our Bibles was originally an oral tale. It is not suppose to be history: it is about the ups and downs of the people's relationship with God.

But what a great speech Moses gives! I have often relied on it in my own spiritual journey when I come to a fork in the road.

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curse.' Moses speaks on God's behalf, his last will and testament, since he will not be allowed to cross over Jordan. "Choose life." These words give me goosebumps. We read them at our wedding because they are both a challenge and an affirmation.

But guess what? This passage may not really be written for the occasion of crossing over the Jordan. The stories in the Torah were written down by at least four different authors from different traditions several hundred years after the fact. Scholars think this passage was actually written by someone who lived hundreds of years after the event, someone who was either witness the crumbling Kingdom of Israel or a little later, languishing in exile

in Babylon. The people hearing this passage are not those with Moses in the desert, but rather their distant descendants.

God's ultimatum "Choose life or choose death" is less a threat of what will happen than it is a description of what has already happened to these people who broke the covenant. It's not a warning, but an explanation why such horror has occurred.

The original covenant of God with Moses and the people at Moab does date from the time of their entry into Palestine. They were unsure of their future and Moses' words were an assurance. Raising up this same assurance for exiles returning from Babylon is a very real parallel addressing their uncertainty about their future life. Its author wants the people to reembrace the covenant so that a second chance will take hold.

Here is an interest fact: this is the only place in all the OT where the verb "to choose" is used with human beings as the subject. In every other use instance it's about GOD choosing. Here lies the evidence for God's gift of free will to the people.

What went wrong all those years ago, they ask, as they look back at their history, to attempt to understand what went poorly with the choices they made. And there it is, plain as day: They did NOT choose to stay in covenant with God. They did NOT choose to follow the law. They did NOT choose to walk in the ways of the Torah. They made all the wrong choices.

All of us can confess our bad choices in retrospect. Looking back, it's not hard to see how we got off the path. Surely it is the very nature of being human. In the words of the Apostle Paul (Romans 7): "In my flesh, I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. "

What about us: what do we do when we come to that fork in the road, that difficult choice? In our modern world we go fast in our cars and jets that we may not even realize there's a directional choice to consider until it's too late. It's easy to make the wrong choice when you are in a rush!

Then call to mind the wonderful lines from Robert Frost:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.

Our choices in life are our own, based partly on which we value more, the destination or the path itself. Those of us in a great hurry often think only of the destination, asking of our cellphones: what is the fastest way, with the fewest traffic cops? We may not notice the beauty as we speed along. The more Frostian way to choose is to ask: which is the path less traveled? Which is more inviting? More challenging? How shady is it? How steep?

Like those ancient Hebrews returning from exile, we need to make our choices in light of past decisions and the consequences they have had. After the Exile, the people of Israel had to reassess the way that they had been living, whether or not they had lived within God's covenant.

Listen again to God's words to the community in this passage.

“Choose life by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, observing his commandments. “ And later, in v. 20, again by loving God, and hearing God's voice, and keeping close to God.

All are verbs in the active present tense. They are not specific actions but different ways of expressing our commitment to a relationship with God. God said: Don't get all fascinated by the fact that you are going to be owner occupants of your own real estate. Don't get caught up in the dangerous webs of power and wealth and status. Instead remain as nomads in your hearts, wanderers still on the Way, people who find God's mercies new every morning and who greet everyone as a child of God. Live Torah.

The thing about grace? God keeps offering a fork in the road EVERY TIME, no matter what bad or unethical choices we have made in the past. That's the wonder of second chances and God's forgiveness. Every day we come to another fork in the road: what we choose is not so much a destination, but a way of living. All the small day to day choices. What will I do with my moment of silence this day? Will I give my spare change to the beggar on the street? Will I say hello to someone I don't know in the church pews? The path of our individual lives consists of the many small choices we face in each moment, and tests our commitment to the core of our faith.

This scripture is not just a little morality play for individuals. It is actually addressed to us as a community of God's people and invites us to look not only forward to what will come, but back toward what we have done and the mistakes we collectively have made. We can learn from them.

Does that shoe fit this church community? Rather than blaming past leadership, clergy or lay; rather than blaming one another for uncivil or unjust actions; rather than dwelling in old problems: How about attempting to learn from places where the covenant is broken and the dike is leaking? How about reciting together again the commitment God asks of us. What about making a bold new choice for Life?

Let us all choose life, to live in God's Way moment by moment. Choose the path that leads to God at the center of life, the one that bears fruit.