

Choosing Life

02/12/2023

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Today's reading comes to us at the conclusion of the Israelite's 40-year journey out of Egypt and just on the cusp of their making it to the long-awaited Promised Land. They now stand on the other side of the Jordan from this place to which God has led them for 40 years. Before they enter and before Moses goes off to die, he gives the Israelites one last rundown of God's commandments and statutes. So, now we reach today's reading, and Moses concludes this epic journey that started with the Burning Bush with two words: "Choose life." Sounds rather simple, does it not? Just what might this mean, though, for them and for us?

According to Moses, his idea of "life" is an existence highlighted by obedience to God's commandments and worship of this single God of Jacob and Isaac. Part of his argument, made here and throughout the preceding chapters, is that God first chose Israel. There were other nations and peoples, potentially far more qualified for being God's chosen people than Israel, but God chose Israel nonetheless. Therefore, it is only right that we, God's people, choose God as well, and therein choose to follow Their tenants and commandments. Moses even gives a very good reason to do so, to "Choose God." If we follow God's commands, worship and obey Them, then our lives will be long and prosperous. However, if we worship other gods, if we turn our backs on the God of Israel and all They have done for us, if we turn our backs on God's teachings and commandments, we shall never know prosperity, because we will die. Moses' argument here makes our choice sound rather simple, yes? "Life" is this wonderful thing that is to be sought after, whereas "death," by contrast, is something to be feared, something that is a worst-possible scenario and to be avoided at all costs. So, it sounds simple, and this makes the choice easy, right? Well, that would be the case if "life" were actually simple or easy. However, who here would agree that "life" by any means is simple or easy? Life is hard, at least at times, yes?

The three wisemen in the story of Epiphany knew this truth all too well. They went searching for this baby, having been told by Herod to return when they found him that he might go pay him homage as well. The wisemen, however, are warned in a dream of Herod's plot to kill the boy. So, the wisemen have a choice to make. They can return to Herod, choose life for themselves, but their life would invariably cost that of Jesus and probably his parents. Therefore, they would have life, yes, but they would have to live with Jesus' death on their hands. However, there is another option: they can follow the angel's instructions, therein choosing life for Jesus, but this would mean potentially being hunted down by Herod for what might be perceived as "betrayal." In short, by choosing life for one party, they invariably risk death for the other. This leads us back, then, to another truth of Moses saying, "Choose life": that it affects more than just us.

Running with this definition of "life" being "favoritism by God in exchange for worship and obedience," this choice is revealed to be far more communal. If the Israelites choose to live, it means God's favoritism is removed from, maybe even turned against, others, including those who will be killed and driven out of the Promised Land so that the Israelites might inhabit it. Also, if the Israelites and we are obeying God's commands, this means loving not just God and self, but one's neighbors. To choose life for one's self is to choose life/death for others as well.

If a church that is on decline chooses to live, to keep pushing forward, their decision to remain as a part of the community will, for better or for worse, affect that community, just as their death would affect the community.

So, what then would it mean for us as individuals, or even a communal group like a church, to “choose life?” On an individual level, it may mean exercising more, giving up a vice/addiction, attending church more, seeking work elsewhere if one’s workplace isn’t life-giving, or any of a number of changes. As for a communal group, it could be as simple as staying the course, hoping for a miracle, and therein making the change of abandoning one’s search of changes to make. It could be more complex like changes in programming, leadership, or spending. It could be as drastic yet simple as choosing to close up shop for good. However, each of these examples, whether on an individual or communal basis, requires a sacrifice of some kind, and that’s just what “change” is: sacrificing one practice or reality so that another might take its place. This is a situation not unfamiliar to the Israelites to whom Moses speaks in today’s reading.

They have gone from freedom to slavery, then slavery to freedom again. They went from having beds, homes, and food to having simply tents and that which God provided. They went from having no God to having our God. Now, they’re going from a nomadic lifestyle, wandering the wilderness, with Moses there to lead and guide them every step of the way, to living in one place as one people sans Moses. The story of the Exodus and the arrival of the Israelites at the Promised Land is fraught with changes, some of which were not easy to grab a hold of, but those changes meant great longevity, greater prosperity; those changes meant “life” as Moses defines it.

In the end, this decision to “choose life” isn’t always the easiest thing for us to do, and it’s definitely not as simple as Moses makes it sound. However, we need to remember that, when we “choose life,” whatever that means in a particular situation, we don’t do it alone. God gave us commandments and teachings to follow, a Spirit to guide our hearts in following those rules and in seeing where God may be leading us next, and a Savior whose sacrifice gave us eternal life, despite what mistakes we might make along the way. Just as God was with the Israelites in today’s story as they ventured into this unknown land, facing an unknown future, so too is God with us now, helping us to understand how best to “choose life,” be it for the Church Universal, for our individual church, or even just for ourselves as individual members of it. So, I close with this question: How are you choosing life right now?