

“Set Before Us Today”

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 God’s ways,
and observing God’s 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 God,
and holding fast to God; 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.

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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I.

For the RECORD you are all, *all* of you, making me work too hard; *way* too hard. I just want you to know that going in. I do not think there has been a more intense two week period of pastoral care needs in the span of my entire pastorate than these last two; no small thing, as I have been at this for 30 years. I have driven more miles, and spent more time in homes, hospitals and nursing homes than I could have ever thought possible.

But that isn't why you are making me work too hard. In fact, comparably speaking, that is the relatively straightforward stuff; the driving, the abiding, the praying, the talking, the listening, the heart-ache and the sharing of woe and sorrows. No, what you've done to make me work so hard, too hard really, is that you have challenged my theological understanding of the world.

II.

Which is saying something, because I am not just talking here about interesting asides, novel curiosities or quirky ideas nipping at the margins. This is challenge at a *fundamental* level; at the very core of my understanding of God, and my relationship with that God. At first, I thought all of this had happened somewhat suddenly in a short span of time. Upon reflection, though, I can now see that it has been coming on for quite a few years. In fact, I'm to the point of admitting that it has been lurking there in the shadows almost from the beginning. Perhaps I just didn't understand it, or perhaps I simply didn't care to admit it. Whenever such things happen, things that seemingly shift the very ground beneath our feet, it pays to turn one's attention to the circumstances which gave rise to the moment of discovery or realization as this is the first in a long line of bread crumbs which reveal how we've come to find ourselves in such a place as this.

III.

The best that I can figure, this is what happened to me. Just after the new year I sat down one day in my office to plan the bulletin information for the chunk of time from Christmastide through Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent, which is next week; when I will be away and Chris Remick will be here to preach and lead worship. As is my habit, I selected the Call to Worship, the Prayer of Confession and the clip art for the cover of the bulletin. However, I do all of this only *after* I've selected the scripture passage I plan to preach on for that particular Sunday.

In case you are wondering, it really isn't all that difficult. The Lectionary provides four readings for every Sunday of the year which usually share some common theme between them: one from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from the Gospels and one other from the New Testament such as a Pauline or catholic epistle, Acts, or the Book of Revelations.

IV.

I simply read over each of them, and pick the one that has a unique hook, or the one which I find most interesting, or the one which I think speaks best to where we are at as a church. Of course, there is also a prayerful expectation that the Spirit will push one to the fore and, ideally, offer some inspiration that points me in a direction for the sermon which will arise out of the specific text.

That said, simple is better and easiest is best. Which probably explains why, on that particular day in early January, I selected today's passage from the book of Deuteronomy. Which would not be my usual pick. Rarely do I preach from Deuteronomy as it can be a little dry and somewhat heavy on the proscriptions; that is, what the people of God should and, more often, should *not* be doing. Though it feels (at least to me) to be a little top-heavy, Deuteronomy is rather straightforward and it is this, I believe, which drew me to this particular passage as today's text.

V.

The fifth and last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy is also fifth book of the Christian Old Testament. The first 30 chapters of the book consist of three sermons or speeches delivered to the Israelites by Moses on the Plains of

Moab, shortly before they entered the Promised Land after wandering for 40 years in the wilderness after their exodus from enslavement in Egypt. The first sermon recounts the forty years of wilderness wanderings which had led to that moment, and ends with an exhortation to observe the law. The second sermon reminds the Israelites of the need to follow Yahweh and the laws and teachings given to them, and on which their possession of the Promised Land would depend. The third sermon offers the comfort that, even should the nation of Israel prove unfaithful so as to lose the land, with repentance all can be restored. The final four chapters (31–34) contain the Song of Moses, the Blessing of Moses, and the narratives recounting the passing of the mantle of leadership from Moses to Joshua and, finally, concludes with the death of Moses.

VI.

One of the book's most significant verses is Deuteronomy 6:4, which has been described as the definitive statement of Jewish identity: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." The passage then continues: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength."

These verses from Deuteronomy, 6:4–5, were also quoted by Jesus in Mark 12, which Jesus calls the First Commandment; then Jesus adds an addendum he calls the Second Commandment, "And love your neighbor as yourself." What we refer to as the Great Commandment. Jesus says, "There is no other commandant greater than these."

VII.

We are getting little ahead of ourselves, though. Returning to today's text, which is found within the third and final sermon, Moses presents the people of God with a very clear and unambiguous choice: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, (or) death and adversity." Moses then goes on to articulate a masterful rendition of the kind of "If-Then" theology we talked about last Sunday:

*If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's 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 (**then**) you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

VIII.

Don't you just love that? I mean, I *love* it. It appeals to my sensibilities at a very basic level. For better or worse, I tend to be a very "This or That" person. There is right, and there is wrong. Either you're going to do something, or you are not. You are in or you are out. You are on the bus or off the bus. You are telling the truth or you are not telling the truth. You are a person of character or you are not. You are one to be trusted, or one to be mistrusted.

Simply put, the jury does not stay out for very long in my view of the world. And I *like* it that way, all wrapped up with a bow: so neat, so tidy, so easy to comprehend. Not only that, it saves an awful lot of time and energy; both of which seem to be in increasing short supply these days. "This or that" is efficient, pragmatic and, oh, so pleasing to my nature.

IX.

I would gladly remain in such a world of my own making, incessantly reinforced by the plethora of scriptural mandates such as the one so elegantly expressed in today's reading from Deuteronomy 30. To borrow from John Belushi, "But Noooooo!" all of *you* managed to somehow put that particular genie back in the bottle for me. And here I thought I had it *all* figured out.

What happened was, when I sat down to actually write the sermon I reread Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and while it still made sense it seemed to have lost its relevance. I'm talking, "POOF!" *Gone*. As I seem to find myself repeating a lot of late, nothing in the passage was necessarily "wrong" in any way, shape or form. Instead, I realized I had moved past it in a ho-hum, what have you done for me lately kind of way. Not that it didn't apply but, rather, that it didn't necessary matter that it applied. Which is precisely when I felt the ground beneath my feet start to shift.

X.

We do not need heaven and earth called to witness that in every given day God sets before us life and death, blessings and curses. Of course God does, and of course we must choose life as Moses instructed the people of God out on the Plains of Moab. For heaven's sake, though, it is seldom that simple and rarely that easy.

We all know, as Dr. Hollis would remind us, that we should brush our teeth in the morning, before bed, and after every meal; with a good floss at least twice a day, to boot. Yes, part of it is we all have a choice. We know there is a right thing to do; the "this" and the "that" are clearly defined and evident. Another part of it, however, is that such choices happen on the ground, live, and in real time; typically, when we are at our most worn, overwhelmed and vulnerable and simply just doing the best we can.

XI.

These past two weeks, amid all of the acute pastoral needs which have arisen in our congregation I have been made to realize the profound difference between theory and praxis, between principal and practice and it has signaled a change in me. Not that a changed needs to *start* happening but, rather, that all of you have, in fact, been *changing* me all along the way, and for all of this time, not just of late. In simply living your lives, and helping me to live mine, you have challenged my theological understanding of the world, of God, and of my relationship with God. And I am here to tell you, it is a beautiful thing you've done. I am so very thankful to you, to *all* of you.

XII.

Moses and Jesus speak of two great commandments: We shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength; and love our neighbor as ourself. There is no greater commandment than these.

To these, though, I would add a close third: And we shall be gentle with each other and, especially, ourselves when the choice set before us *some* days between life and prosperity, death and adversity are as one; just as the Lord our God is One. Amen.