

## **“Choose the Path That Leads to Life”**

Date: Feb. 13, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Theme: choices

Occasion: Epiphany 6 Year A

You and I are constantly making choices, are we not? Some of them are very minor choices. Think about all the choices that you made getting ready for church this morning - which dress, which shirt to put on; what to eat; when to leave the house, and so forth. Minor choices, but choices nonetheless.

And then there are those life-changing choices - like what career to pursue, whether to get married, which college to go to, and which football team to cheer for in the Super Bowl. No, that isn't really a life-changing decision.

Have you heard the joke about the flight attendant who asked a man, “would you like dinner?” the man answered, “What are my choices?” The flight attendant said, “Yes, or no!”

That's what Moses is saying here. You have a choice to make. “Do you say Yes or No to God?” And then he pleads with the people. “Please, say yes! Choose life with God. Because God loves you, choose life with God.”

With God's power and help, Moses had led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery; he has led them through the wilderness, and now he has brought them to the brink of the promised land. Moses is old and weak and tired, and he can't go on with them. So, he give them their final instructions.

He tells them that when they get into the Promised Land, they will be tempted to chase after false gods; they will be tempted to forget about God and His love; they will be tempted to forget about God's covenant and His commandments. And so he implores them not to choose a destructive way of living, but to remember

God's love and to choose life with God.

One of the Lord's final words to His people, given through Moses was this: "I call upon 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." (Deut. 30:19)

God has made us with free will. God gives us choices. Some are easy to make, others are more difficult. Some are a matter of life and death. One of the marks of maturity is the discovery that we have consequences for the choices we make. If we choose rightly, we reap rewards - either now or in the future. If we choose wrongly, we sometimes pay a steep price. Either now, or later.

I would suggest to you this morning that God has given us three choices, that very well may determine our eternal destiny. They are gifts from our Heavenly Father. They are gifts that if we choose to accept them will bring life. And if we choose to reject them, very well may lead to our death - either here, or for eternity.

The first of these gifts is God's Word, what we call the Bible. Moses presented the people with the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall make no idol. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Honor your mother and your father. You shall not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness or covet anything that is your neighbor's." "Do these and live," says Moses. "Disobey, and the result is death."

The Ten Commandments are the beginning point for understanding God's will for our lives. God gives us rules to live by, not to make our lives more difficult or less fun. But these are the boundaries, the parameters in which we can live and move and have our being, and find life.

I remember an interview during the Olympic games in Lillhammer. It was with one of the leaders of the US Olympics team. He was asked how much credit for the success of the US team should rightfully go to the athletes, and how much should go to the development and training program provided to the athletes.

The answer of course was both. The athletes had to have talent. But without the plan, the structure, the discipline, the individuals would not have been as prepared for competition. The training structure provided a place where the athletes could develop their talents to their potential.

The Bible gives us the structure by which we can pattern our lives, so that we can discover life in its fullness. When our new members join (ed) the church, they were asked, "Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?"

This book, these words, these commandments - are given to us by God so that we may discover the way that leads to eternal life. Amen? Amen!

Secondly, God gives us the gift of community. Today we had seven individuals choose to become full members of this faith community. They decided that being a Christian on their own was not enough. And I think they chose wisely. It is in the faith community that I can test my ideas, raise my questions, and have my faith strengthened. Alone, I wander in a spiritual wilderness, trusting only my own thoughts.

In the context of a community, we are given the opportunity to discover and use our spiritual gifts. In a community, we have a place to turn when life is hard - a place to go for comfort and strength. In a community, our faith is renewed on a weekly basis when we come together for worship. We are reminded that we are the Body of Christ, and Jesus needs all of the members to function properly.

A pastor once visited a parishioner who had become inactive. Together they sat in front of the man's fireplace. They sat in silence, and at one point the pastor took the iron tongs and pulled a burning ember from the fire. He placed it on the brick fireplace. After several minutes the burning ember went cold. The pastor then got up and used the tongs to place it back into the fire, and the unburnt piece of wood was soon aflame again. The parishioner turned to the pastor and said, "I'll see you in church on Sunday."

God gives us the Church so that we might live, fully alive in Christ, as His body. Choose this day, life or death, blessings or curses. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Amen? Amen.

Finally, God gives us His Son, Jesus Christ. In Him, there is eternal life. People often ask me if people of other faiths will get to Heaven, and my response is simply this, "I don't know. But I do know that I have found the Way through Jesus. I can't say what will happen to those other people. But I have committed my life to following Jesus, and it makes all the difference in the world."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells of a moment when he was on the verge of giving up all hope while being held prisoner in a Soviet Prison Camp. He was working 12 hours a day at hard labor. He was existing on a starvation diet. He had become gravely ill. The doctors were predicting his death, and frankly, he didn't care whether he lived or died.

One afternoon, while shoveling sand under a blazing sun, he simply stopped working. He did so knowing that the guards would beat him severely, perhaps to death. But he didn't care anymore. He felt that he just couldn't go on. But then he saw another prisoner, a fellow Christian, moving toward him cautiously. With his cane, the man quickly drew a cross in the sand.... and then quickly erased it.

In that brief moment Solzhenitsyn felt all the hope of the Gospel flood through his soul. It gave him the strength and courage to endure that difficult day, and the hard months of imprisonment that followed.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was saved that day by the sign of the cross. That quick reminder of God's love and power gave him the strength to hold on. The hymn writer put it like this: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of Earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace."

Well, my dear friends, the choice is ours. But let me say with all the feeling I have in my heart, "Choose life!" Choose the path that leads to life - by choosing to be a man of the Book, a woman of the Book. Choose the path that leads to life - by choosing to be a part of the Body of Christ, and a member of a faith community. Choose the path that leads to life - by choosing to embrace Jesus Christ, as your Lord and as your Savior.