

**Choose Life**  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Heather Prince Doss  
Sea Island Presbyterian Church  
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As we meet Moses today, he is facing his mortality. He has led the Israelites for a long time over a long distance. The whole community is camped on the plains of Moab, east of Jordan River, making preparation to cross over and enter the land that God promised to their ancestor Abraham. Moses knows that his journey is nearly finished. He is not strong enough to go into battle, and that is not God's design for him anyway. A new leader has risen for Israel, and Moses, comprehending that his days are short in number.

Facing mortality is something that none of us likes to do. At not-quite-thirty-years-old, I do not think too much about my own mortality. I can tell you that when my dad tries to tell me that he's getting older and might not be around much longer, I immediately want to close my ears and my heart because I cannot yet bear to think of his mortality. We hardly ever think about death except in the face of old age or disease. We all know and love someone who is battling hard to live in the face of some disease or illness. We spend a lot of time praying that these loved ones will continue to fight. And yet we also know that none of us will live on this earth forever. I am not the first to say that death is one of the only certainties in life.

As Moses realizes that his life is ending, he does what many dying people do: Moses remembers.

Moses remembers aloud and for the whole community how God has delivered Israel from slavery, and provided them with manna in the desert. He remembers the apostasy of Israel as they bowed down to a golden calf, and the grace of the Lord who gave Israel the Torah, teaching them how to live rightly with God and each other. Moses remembers all of the laws, from the 10 Commandments to the prescriptions against harvesting the edges of your field. He tells the story of liberation, provision, deceit, forgiveness, and covenant for all of Israel to hear. I do not think that Moses is worried about preserving his own legacy. Instead, I think he is worried about the collective memory of the people Israel. There are those in this company who were born in the wilderness. Moses knows he must tell the story to keep Israel's history and future alive. This is his dying plea:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God . . . then you shall live long and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land 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; . . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

Last week, I drew on John Winthrop's great sermon that envisioned the new England as a city upon a hill. This week, as I opened my Bible and read Moses' exhortation to Israel on the banks of the Jordan, his words rang oddly familiar. With another moment's thought, I realized that I

had read these words just a few days before in the words of John Winthrop. He closes his sermon to those west-bound settlers with the same exhortation – to choose life. It is choice which prizes obedience over profit or pleasure, which recognizes that God alone is the source of prosperity and joy.

Last Sunday, John Winthrop and the prophet Isaiah reminded us that to be a light to the nations, a city on a hill, our faith must be real. Our profession of faith must be authenticated in our practices. Today, John Winthrop lifts his voice with Moses to say that God has offered us the gift of life – good and abundant life. But, Winthrop and Moses say, that good and abundant life “does not just happen automatically. The land given must also be the land taken. The life offered must also be the life lived out.”<sup>1</sup> Even on the brink of an uncertain new world, even as the future is unsure, even in the midst of adversity, even when death is imminent good and abundant life is both God’s gift and our choice.

In the American vernacular, choice and obedience do not usually seem to go hand in hand. We value choice and feel frustrated when there are not enough choices. (Although, some studies show that we also feel frustrated when there are too many choices.) Choice is liberating. Obedience is constricting. And yet the choice that Moses offers is clear: choose obedience and life or idolatry and death. There is no in between. The commands that God gives are commands for a good life, both individually and for the community as a whole. Walk with God. Do justice to the poor. Show kindness to others. “God’s commands and ways are meant not as restrictions but rather as prescriptions that lead to the fullness of life for all; in that sense, their end is not meant to constrict but to set free.”<sup>2</sup>

The freedom of obedience is made known most clearly in Christ. To choose Christ is to choose life – abundant and eternal life. To choose Christ is to be liberated from the power of death. But it is also to choose obedience to Christ’s narrow way. It is to choose to live life as God intended.

Most of the choices we make every day seem insignificant – hardly matters of life and death, and hardly matters of obedience to God. Name brand or store brand? Paper or plastic? Credit or debit? Large or super size? Snooze or gym? We make hundreds of small choices every day. Many of them are not important enough to require any real wrestling. And yet it is precisely in these small choices that we choose life or death for our community and our selves. We choose death whenever we choose anything that moves us farther away from God. When we choose personal comfort over sacrifice for others, we choose death. When we choose to complain instead of give thanks, we choose death. When we choose hoarding instead of generosity, we choose death. One author writes that “death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990) p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> Carol J. Dempsey, “Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Theological Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word* edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year A Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 340.

<sup>3</sup> Brett Younger, “Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Homiletical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word* edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year A Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 341.

But take heart, because the choice for life is also made in small, daily decisions that we face. Life is also a slow process of giving ourselves to what does matter – first of all to Christ. Even after the decision of the heart to follow Christ, we must discern every day how to do it. What are the decisions we make that move us nearer to God and that embrace the good life of God? They are choices that are laid out for us in God’s law and made clearer in the life of Christ, the one who fulfills the law. They are, most of them, not big choices. But they do often run counter to the forces of the world around us.

The choice for life relates to our worship of God. Pray regularly and genuinely. Shut out the distractions that interrupt your communion with God. Sing songs and hymns with the abandon of a little child. Believe that God loves you.

The choice for life is a choice for honoring parents and loving neighbors. Turn off the television or computer in favor of conversation. Pick up the phone to call that relative that is too easily forgotten. Play with your children. Come home from work a little early. Eat dinner at the table with your spouse. Stop complaining about your family. Apologize, even if it was mostly not your fault. Forgive, even when forgiveness is not deserved. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others.

The choice for life is a choice for generous giving. Give money to a cause that touches your heart. Give your time to help someone who needs help. Bake a casserole for a busy friend. Stop buying things that you cannot afford. Stop buying things that you can afford but do not really need. Give the money away instead.

The choice for life is a choice for caring for the poor and weak. See Christ in the people around you – especially the people who serve you at the grocery store, at restaurants, anywhere. Notice people whom no one else notices. Spend time volunteering at somewhere like HELP of Beaufort. Do not buy things if you know others are hurt in their production. Pay your workers fairly and adequately. Speak up when you see some person or group mistreated.

Jesus said that he came so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Life is God’s gift. But it is also our choice. You do not need to be young to choose life. You do not need to be healthy. You do not need to be secure. You do not need to be perfect or even pretty good. You can always make a new start – reaffirm your obedience to God and Christ. Choosing life is a lifelong process, one that is done over and over again and sometimes best learned in the midst of change and struggle.

At the end of Moses’ reflection on his life and the life of Israel, the people offer no response. Moses’ question rings out from the Israel of Deuteronomy, off the pages of the Bible, through the ages until it rings once again in our ears – for us to answer: “Today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”