

“Choose Life”

“Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ...”

For many years, Susan and I would drive into New York City from New Jersey where she studied voice with Beverly Myers, who has become one of our dearest friends. Since Beverly’s apartment is quite small, I would drop Susan off at her building and walk over to the Westway Diner on Ninth Avenue for lunch. Even though we had many diners in New Jersey, I quickly discovered that diners in Manhattan are very different; on my first visit, I was led to a small table and given a menu that was several pages long. No sooner had I opened the menu than a waiter appeared and my table and gruffly asked, “What do you want?” Since I had barely looked at the menu, I asked if I could have a few moments to decide, which apparently was the wrong answer since he was obviously upset that I wasn’t ready to make a choice. A few minutes passed, and the waiter appeared again with a look on his face that indicated that I had better have made a choice, so I said the first thing that came to my mind: “Tuna salad on rye and a Coke.” He grabbed my menu, walked briskly to the kitchen window, and barked out something that must have been in diner code since it didn’t make any sense to me. A few more minutes passed, and my sandwich arrived along with the check, an indication that I was expected to eat my sandwich fast and vacate the table so that another customer could be seated. I learned my lesson on that first visit, so that whenever I went to the Westway Diner I was ready to make a choice.

While not all choices need to be made as quickly as my lunch order in Manhattan, we are confronted with many choices in the course of everyday life. Some are mundane: what we will eat for breakfast, or what clothes we will wear, or what music we might listen to on our car radio. Some choices may have more lasting consequences: whether we get adequate sleep, or make a decision at work that will have a positive impact in the lives of others, or how we organize our weekly schedule so that we might spend time with the important people in our lives. And then there are those choices that can be life-changing: what career we might pursue, or where we will attend university, or the person we will marry. Choices are an inevitable part of life; in the words of the late Neil Peart, *“If you choose not to decide you still have made a choice.”*

As the people of Israel are about to enter the Promised Land after their years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses challenges them to make choices that will result in life for them and for their descendants. Today’s first lesson from Deuteronomy is the conclusion of the farewell address of Moses to the people of Israel, since Moses will die before they enter *“the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”* (30:20). Moses’ speech is addressed to a community of Israel who found themselves at a new juncture in their national history. As Israel is about to once again cross the Jordan River and repossess the land promised to their ancestor, Moses’ speech is a strong appeal to faith, urging Israel to accept its past failures, to recognize its hopeless position without faith in God, and to return to a renewed loyalty to the covenant and its commandments. *“A new life would open up for the people once they had resettled in their ancient homeland.”* (Ronald C. Clements).

The people of Israel faced a choice as they were about to reenter the promised land: they could either abandon God and the covenant altogether, as the fainthearted among them had begun to do, or they could return in sincerity and truth to keep God’s covenant and to remain unwaveringly loyal to the LORD

as God. The choices that Moses sets before the people are clearly defined as “*life and prosperity, death and adversity*” (30:15). The first choice involves obedience to the covenant and its commandments, which includes “*loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances*” (30:16); the result of choosing such obedience is that “*you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.*” The second choice warns of the consequences of choosing to reject the commandments of the LORD and pursuing other gods: “*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.*” (30:17-18). Moses sets the choices before the people and urges them to make the right decision: “*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 ...*” (30:19-20). Moses’ message made a demand on this generation of Israelites, the same demand that had been made on every Israelite since the original covenant had been established on Mt. Sinai: they must choose between following the way of God or abandoning it.

- “The could either remain totally loyal to the covenant, obeying its commandments, or they could turn away, but in doing do they would also abandon the promise of hope altogether; they would be throwing away the only lifeline that was within their grasp.” – Clements.

Moses’ encouragement that the people of Israel “choose life” is at the heart of the call of God to God’s people throughout the generations. It is not a matter of choosing whether or not God will love us or bless us, because God’s love and blessings are always given freely and graciously “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all*” (*Small Catechism*). It is a matter of choosing how we will respond to God’s blessings and God’s call to place all our faith and trust in the Lord. A gift is always given freely, but a gift can be rejected; we can choose whether or not we will open our hearts and lives to receiving the blessing of God and whether or not we will heed our Lord’s call to walk in obedience as a child of the light. The call of our Lord is always to “choose life,” but the reality is that even though the light came into the world through our Lord Jesus Christ, “*people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*” (John 3:19). The teachings and commandments of the Lord point us toward the blessings that will result in life and prosperity, but it is our call to choose to place our trust in the Lord, and far too often people choose to turn their backs on God and follow paths that lead them away from the light of the Lord into the darkness that will result in placing our trust in something which proves to not be worthy of faith.

- “The commands, together with the sanctions, constituted the life-world in which Israel proposed to live. That life-world offered its adherents enormous blessing and was known to be morally reliable. The violator of that life-world as willed by Yahweh was commensurately to receive all the deathliness that came with a denial of the governance of Yahweh.” – Walter Brueggemann.

The biblical pattern of God’s people making poor choices can leave the reader of Scripture discouraged, but the continuing faithlessness of the people is met throughout the Bible by the steadfast faithfulness of the Lord, who continually calls on God’s people to make the choice of repentance and returning to the God of all blessedness. The prophets of the Old Testament called upon the people of Israel to choose to return to the Lord even as they spoke words of judgment over the unfaithful choices and the dire consequences of those decisions:

- “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near – a day of darkness and gloom, a day

of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been form of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come ... Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." – Joel 2: 1-2, 12-13.

- "If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, if you remove the abominations from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, 'As the LORD lives!' in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast." – Jeremiah 4:1-2.
- "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the LORD; and say to him, 'Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips.' ... I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them." – Hosea 14:1-2, 4.

This call to repentance, the call of Moses for God's people to "choose life," is also the message that is proclaimed in the Gospels by John the Baptist, who called on the people who came out to the Jordan to be baptized by him "*repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Matthew 3:2), the same words that Jesus proclaims at the beginning of his ministry. It is a call to change one's mind and to change the direction of one's life, a call to stop making bad choices that lead one away from God and begin making choices that will lead one to the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation.

The importance of choosing life, choosing to live according to the teachings of our Lord, is at the heart of the daily life of a Christian. While Holy Baptism is the free gift of God in which we are freed from "*sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with [Christ's] holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death*" (*Small Catechism*) it is our choice whether or not we will affirm this baptismal relationship and choose to continue in the covenant that God made with us in Holy Baptism. On the day of Confirmation, we declare publicly that we have chosen to live according to our Saviour's teachings for his baptized people: "*to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*" (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). God's grace is always a free gift, but it is our choice whether or not to receive this gift and live in accordance to what this gift requires of those who have been "*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*"

- "When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. The grace of his call bursts all bonds of legalism. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It transcends the difference between the law and the gospel. Christ calls, the disciple follows: that is grace and commandment in one. 'I will walk at liberty, for I seek thy commandments.' (Psalm 119:45)." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

In his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul urges the young pastor to teach his congregation the importance of making good choices, which means rejecting any teaching that seeks to draw people away from God. The early church was plagued by false teachers who would present themselves as legitimate representatives of the Gospel but would soon be revealed as "wolves in sheep's clothing." Paul warns the Colossian church to "*see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.*" (Colossians 2:8). Those who choose to follow Jesus and the "sound teaching" of the Gospel are

called to make the decision to “*put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly*” and instead to be “*clothed ... with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.*” (Colossians 3:5, 10). Timothy is encouraged by the apostle “*instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith*” (1 Timothy 1:3-4). Those who choose to follow the path of discipleship in hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and living in obedience to Christ’s teachings have chosen life, “*because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.*” (4:10).

- “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ’s power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past: that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus.” – Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*.

Following our Lord Jesus Christ is a choice that is laid before every generation of God’s people, and continuing to walk in faithfulness involves many choices that must be made throughout our lives, daily and often quickly:

- Are my choices based on my will or on God’s Will?
- Am I focused on fulfilling my desires or conforming my life so that what God desires might be accomplished?
- Am I mostly concerned with my agenda or on the teachings of God’s Word?
- Am I following a path of my own choosing, or have I chosen to follow Jesus on the path of discipleship?

“*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.*” – Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”

The choices we make, the roads upon which we choose to travel, make all the difference in our lives and the lives of those to whom we are connected. For God’s people, the choice is clear: follow that ways of the Lord that lead to live or follow other paths whose destinations do not offer the same hope. This is the choice that Joshua laid upon the people of Israel when he encouraged them to “*revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.*” (Joshua 24:14). But Joshua also acknowledges that the people have the freedom to make other choices to serve other gods, but that he and his household have made their decision:

- “Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” – Joshua 24:15.

It didn’t really matter what choices I made for lunch at the Westway Diner; but the choices I have made regarding the direction of my life and answering God’s call have made a difference in my life and in the lives of those with whom I share a close relationship. Our lives are filled with choices that will have wide-ranging consequences; for those of us gathered through baptism into the Church, the choices we

make can result in either a community that faithfully serves our Lord as the embodiment of Christ's love, or a gathering of people whose backs are turned away from God to following other interests that have nothing to do with what God wills for God's people. The roads we choose make all the difference; may we always choose life, the life that is ours in Jesus Christ, the life that is the light of all people.

Amen.