



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 02.16.2020*

*"Choosing Life"*

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-9*

A couple of years ago I was able to fulfill a long-held dream. I've always wanted to visit Mt. Nebo in Jordan, and stand where Moses did some three thousand years ago, looking out across the Jordan Valley into the Promised Land. Moses wasn't able to enter that land, but God did give him this glimpse from Nebo just before he died.

Two years ago a group from our church visited the holy land, and I was finally able to stand on Mt. Nebo. Looking out towards the west we could see the Jordan River and down to the south the Dead Sea into which it fed. Across the valley there were the outlines of the city of Jericho standing against the Judean hills just beyond. This was essentially what Moses saw so long ago: the culmination of his life's work; all that he had dreamed of and striven towards over some four decades of sacrifice and service.

Our first lesson this morning comes just prior to that final vision from Nebo. Standing on the edge of the Promised Land, Moses offers this last discourse to God's people; a speech that begins all the way back with the first verse of Chapter 5, and ends with the last verse of our text (30:20). The four chapters that follow, the final chapters of Deuteronomy, are focused on his death and the formation of the Torah.

We tend to place a lot of weight on people's last words. I'm not sure that is always a good thing. In his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *Lonesome Dove*, author Larry McMurtry makes that point. Towards the end of the book one of the protagonists, Captain Woodrow F. Call, takes on the long and arduous journey from Montana all the way back to Texas with the body of his friend in order to keep a death-bed promise. It was a grand gesture, but it was also pointless – a gesture that cost a great deal not just for Captain Call, but for a number of others as well.

So maybe when someone turns to us on their death-bed and starts a sentence with "Promise me..." we should feign deafness. Or maybe, if the request is unreasonable, we should feel the freedom to say, "Sorry, that's not going to happen." The impulse to comfort and reassurance to the dying is a good, but the truth is that they are soon going to be standing in the presence of God; experiencing for themselves the glory of all eternity. Why should the lives of those they leave behind, already weighed down by grief and loss, carry some additional and unnecessary burden on top of it?

Interestingly, when Moses presents his "death-bed" wish to the people of Israel, they don't respond. He challenges them to choose between life and death, between blessings and curses, between obedience and disobedience, but there is no mention of the people actually making a choice. They just listen to what he has to say which has the effect of leaving this challenge open ended. If there had been an answer, it would have put a period to the encounter – closed the loop – and so placed it firmly in the past. As it is, without that answer, the challenge Moses offers continues to speak to each succeeding generation right down to our own: "What is it going to be: are you going to choose life or death, blessing or curse? Which path are you going to follow?"

And Moses got it exactly right. The choice he offered the Hebrew people is the same choice that confronts us: are we going to follow God or our own devices; are we going to pursue that which brings us life, or that which ultimately undermines and destroys everything we care most about?

Moses has just spent twenty-six chapters laying out the requirements of the law. He is very clear: choosing life means choosing to live by the law. There's the rub. All that law can sound heavy and oppressive to our contemporary ears. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say that they would be a Christian except they don't want to give up this or that; they don't want to come under the burden of all these rules.

But being a Christian is not about a bunch of should's or ought's or must's. It is not about the law. Being a Christian is about following Jesus, and the starting point in that journey is knowing that we are forgiven through him and through his sacrifice; knowing that we are deeply loved; knowing that it is all about grace and not about being good enough or somehow earning God's love. We are already loved, and nothing we do or don't do is going to change that.

So where does the law fit in? Not as a way to prove our righteousness, or prove how worthy we are. No, the law shows us the way to the kingdom kind of life – life at its very best; life as God intended it to be lived. God didn't make us to serve the law. No, the law, as Jesus pointed out, was given to serve us. It was given to help us find that best kind of life.

Now clearly there are going to be times when God's guidance runs counter to what we want to do or feel like doing. What we need to understand is that even (and most especially) then, the law is standing over beating us down and telling us what terrible people we are. The law, rather, is actually "Hey, there's a better way". Consider God's call to be loving and kind. We all know that there are times when that call is exactly the opposite of what we feel like doing.

\*\*\*\*\*

In my devotions I recently came across a piece by Henry Ward Beecher which was drawn from his lectures on preaching at Yale. Beecher was a Congregational pastor, one of the great reformers of the nineteenth century, and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this excerpt he talks about a man whose wife and daughter had come to the faith. Beecher went to visit them and as he was leaving he ran into this husband and father who was sitting on a fence as he passed by.

Of all the filth that was ever emptied on a young minister's head, I received my share. He threw it out, right and left, up and down, and said everything that was calculated to harrow my pride. I was very wholesomely indignant for a young man. I said to myself, "Look here, I will be revenged on you yet." He told me I should never darken his door again, to which I responded that I never would until I had his invitation to do so.

But Beecher didn't strike back. Instead, he made a point to always politely acknowledge him when their paths crossed. He never told anyone how the man had mistreated him. In fact, he did just the opposite. He always spoke kindly of him to their many mutual acquaintances. And when the man ran for sheriff, instead of doing everything he could to undermine and destroy him, Beecher actually went out into the field and used his personal influence to canvass for voters for him. The vote was a close one, but the man was elected. Beecher continues:

When he knew I was working for him, I never saw a man so utterly perplexed as he was. He did not know what to make of it. He came to me one day, awkward and stumbling, and undertook to "make up," as the saying is. He said he would be very glad to have me call and see him. I congratulated him on his election, and of course accepted his overtures; and from that time forth I never had a faster friend in the world than he was. Now I might

have thrown stones at him from the topmost cliffs of Mount Sinai, and hit him every time, but that would not have done him any good. Kindness killed him. I won his confidence.<sup>i</sup> When someone hurts us or insults us our instinct is to strike back. That's very human, but that's not God's way. "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." Beecher could have struck back to devastating effect, but he chose another route. He chose God's way. He chose life, not death, and his life as a result was so much richer for it: can you imagine the joy and satisfaction of seeing someone's life so dramatically impacted because of something you've done?

No, God's way isn't always easy. It is not always the way in which our instincts or inclinations would lead us. But it is finally, (as Moses pointed out) the way of life, the way of blessing. So here in Deuteronomy we find some final words, some last words, that are very much worth paying attention to: words that point to precisely the kind of life that you and I have always wanted.

---

<sup>i</sup> *For All the Saints: a Prayer Book for and by the Church*, (The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, Delhi, NY, 2006), Vol. III, p.392