

Choosing Life
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

One scholar has this to say about our scripture for today:

“This is a very dangerous passage of the Scripture,
used in all manner of perverse ways over the centuries.”¹

So before we can explore what message it might have for us today,
we have to unpack its history and historical context.

The context of this passage is pretty straight forward.

It is presented as Moses’ last speech,

given after the 40 years of wandering through the wilderness,
and before the people enter the Promised Land.

“The failures of the past lie behind them in the desert,
and the challenges of a new future lie before them across the river.”²

Another way of putting this is that they are in a liminal place.

In anthropology, liminality ... is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation
that occurs in the middle stage of rituals,

when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status

but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold
when the ritual is complete.

During a ritual's liminal stage, participants "stand at the threshold"
between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community,
and a new way, which the ritual establishes.³

The Israelites are clearly in this liminal space,

standing at the threshold between the past and the future,

They are letting go of their identity as wanderers,

and not yet living into their identity as people of the land.

They are unsure of what is to come,

uncertain of how their identity will be formed
and their community will be built.

¹ Holbert, John C. “Choose Life!” www.patheos.com. February 10, 2014.

² Bratcher, Dennis. “Sixth Sunday After Epiphany,” *The Voice*.

³ Wikipedia

They are a liminal people, in a liminal place.

It is into this situation that God is quoted as saying,

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

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

Standing, as they are, on the threshold, it is the time to choose,
and to declare that choice.

Now, that is the context of the story.

But the context of when it was written down is different.

It was most likely written just before, during, or immediately after
the Babylonian exile.

At that point in their history they understood everything in their past
as reward or punishment.

When life was good, it was because they were faithful to God.

When life was bad, it was because they were unfaithful to God.

God blessed them or punished them due to their own behavior.

“Though the book of Deuteronomy is a literary collection,

purporting to be a series of sermons from the great law giver, Moses,

to the people of Israel just before their entrance

into the long-expected Land of Promise,

it is in reality a book that offers a look back on a primarily failed Israel.”⁴

All of this contributes to why the passage is so dangerous.

“If one reads this text and its foregoing blessings/curses that offer a framework
for the book of Deuteronomy, but also much of the rest of the Hebrew Bible,

one finds that believing and keeping the commandments

automatically leads to one having a prosperous life,

which includes also riches, fertility, health, and happiness.

Conversely, a failure to keep God’s commandments set out in the rest of
Deuteronomy

equates to death, disease, barrenness, and misery. . . .

[This theology] has had such tremendous influence

throughout the biblical traditions, and, moreover, till this day

shapes many believers’ views regarding sin and suffering. . .

Just as wicked people prosper,

⁴ Holbert, John. “Choose Life!”

bad things happen more often than not to good people.
 The poor do not deserve to be poor.
 Infertile couples have done nothing to deserve the hardships
 of reproductive loss.
 Cells go haywire when people get cancer.
 Accidents and natural disasters happen.
 And to place blame then on people who already suffer
 due to whatever circumstances have robbed them of life
 is to add insult to injury,
 particularly if preachers tell them they deserve what they got.”⁵

The writers of Deuteronomy are also using a technique common
 in high school debates and political campaigns.

You set up two options—it’s this or it’s that—with no middle ground,
 and the audience has to choose.

A few years ago there was a public debate between creationist Ken Ham
 and Bill Nye “The Science Guy.”

Here’s how one theologian described the debate:

“On several occasions, the creationist Ham put the matter to his listeners starkly:
 Either one accepts the Bible, divine creation, moral order, motherhood, apple pie,
 and puppies;

or else one supports evolution, anarchy, [and] ritual sacrifice.

You could just picture folks all across the country sitting in their Barcaloungers,
 looking at their significant other saying,

‘Well, we don’t believe in anarchy or ritual sacrifice, and we love puppies....

So we just can’t be evolutionists.’

Because when you put it that way, who wouldn’t want to disassociate themselves
 from what is being portrayed as the very heart of darkness?”⁶

So . . . this passage is dangerous because it creates false dichotomies,
 and because it presents a theology that if good things happen we deserve them
 and if bad things happen . . . well, we deserve them.

So if it’s so difficult, why did I choose to preach on this text today?

At about 4:00 on Friday afternoon, I was seriously asking myself this question!

I chose it because it does still, in spite of its flaws, have a message for us.

⁵ Claasens, Juliana. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-deuteronomy-3015-20-10>

⁶ <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-choice-deuteronomy-3015-20/>

A message about choices.

One scholar writes,

“Those ancient words from Deuteronomy 30 ricochet down to us today three millennia after they were written.

Those two words capture the invitation of the gospel: ‘Choose life.’

The apostle Paul made a similar appeal to Christians:

‘Take hold of the life that is truly life’ (1 Timothy 6:10).

Jesus described his vocation in similar words:

‘I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10.)”⁷

So what does it mean to choose life?

I provide the caveat that there are of course times we don’t choose life, and for good reason.

I’m particularly thinking of people who are suffering so much physically that they choose to end their life on their terms, or those who choose to end a pregnancy for a variety of reasons.

There are occasions that we do not choose life,

but generally speaking, I think we are called to do so.

Of course, it’s not all about one big choice

because those everyday choices add up.

We choose whether to watch violent movies or video games.

We choose how we respond to the person who cut us off in traffic.

We choose whether to nurse that grudge or let it go.

We choose, over and over, things that give us life or not.

“No, they may not be ‘life and death’ choices,

but they are choices which lean towards life or death . . .

[Choices which set us on a path that leads to life or not.]

And perhaps they prepare us for the day when the choice we are offered will be monumental and life-altering:

That day, for instance, when it will be yours to choose whether to stay in a marriage or a job that is not about life, but about death.

That day when you venture out not knowing what this new life will hold but knowing that the old one was surely not right.

That day when you will need to dig deep to find the courage to speak the truth, even knowing the consequences for you may be less than desirable....

⁷ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20140210JJ.shtml>

That day when we are called to choose between the comfort of what we now know and the terror of what is yet unknowable.”⁸

I married right out of college.

I knew on some level that I was a lesbian,

but my church taught that my kind of love was an abomination,

so I did what I was supposed to do and married “a good Christian boy.”

I was keeping the secret that I was gay,

which led me to choose someone also keeping a secret—

in his case, that he was mentally ill.

The relationship very quickly became emotionally abusive.

But I had been taught that divorce was wrong.

I believed it was my responsibility—my Christian duty—to stay,

to deny myself and pick up my cross.

So I prayed that my husband would hit me

because I knew that if he was physically abusive, I could leave.

And then when he did, I still wasn’t sure it was bad enough.

Then, a few days before Thanksgiving after three years of a miserable marriage,

I went to make meatloaf for dinner.

I took off my wedding ring in order to mix up the ingredients,

and when I got done, I picked up the ring and just stared at it.

I couldn’t bring myself to put it back on.

It was not a sign of a covenant.

It was a symbol of my imprisonment.

I decided that I could not worship a God who would sentence me to that

simply because at the age of 22, I had made a promise.

I never put that ring on again, and six weeks later my sham of a marriage

was legally dissolved.

I chose life over rules.

But even now, 33 years later, I had a typo in that sentence—

I called it my shame of a marriage instead of sham.

There should never be shame in choosing life.

Choose life.

Choose life for yourself AND choose life for others.

You see, this scripture was not to individuals but to a community.

⁸ <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2014/02/choosing-life.html>

And it was not to form a covenant with God because that had already occurred.

This call to choose life was made within the context of relationship,
of community, and it was for all.

So maybe “The command to choose life could also be taken

to work for what makes life possible—

for oneself and one’s immediate circle of concern—

but also for others and the community as a whole.

This question is particularly pertinent when one thinks of some of the
burning ethical questions of the day.

For instance, to name but one example: One should also be mindful
that this conflation of land, blessing, prosperity, and possession
highlighted in the promised land theology underlying this text
has been detrimental to First Peoples in many communities
all around the world.

It is good to consider what blessing and prosperity of the self means
if it comes at the expense of the other.”⁹

In her book *There Was No Path So I Trod One*

Edwina Gateley's poem *Called to Say Yes*

reminds us that our Christian calling is to say no to death in all its forms.

She writes:

We are called to say yes.

That the kingdom might break through

To renew and to transform

Our dark and groping world.

We are called to say yes

That honeysuckle may twine

And twist its smelling leaves

Over the graves of nuclear arms.

We are called to say yes

That children might play

⁹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-deuteronomy-3015-20-10>

*On the soil of Vietnam where the tanks
Belched blood and death.*

*We are called to say yes
That black may sing with white
And pledge peace and healing
For the hatred of the past.*

*We are called to say yes
So that nations might gather
And dance one great movement
For the joy of humankind.*

*We are called to say yes
So that rich and poor embrace
And become equal in their poverty
Through the silent tears that fall.*

*We are called to say yes
To a God who still holds fast
To the vision of the Kingdom
For a trembling world of pain.*

*We are called to say yes
To this God who reaches out
And asks us to share
this crazy dream of love.*

So this morning I say to you:

Choose life. In a thousand different ways, choose life.

Choose to take the scenic route.

Choose to pull over to watch the sunrise.

Choose the nap over studying the spreadsheet.

Choose relationships that make you a better person.

Choose to be vulnerable.

Choose the hard road because it makes you stronger.

Choose the easy road because you need a break.
Choose to forgive when they don't deserve it.
Choose to love another animal even though you still miss the last one.
Choose to give money to the guy with the cardboard sign
without worrying about how he'll spend it.
Choose friends you have nothing in common with.
Choose to smile at the Muslim woman behind you in line.
Choose to protect her from hatred and discrimination.
Choose faith instead of fear.
Choose love.
Choose peace.
Choose life.
Real, complicated, messy, whole-hearted and broken-hearted life.

The path ahead may not be clear.

You may find yourself in a liminal place,

on the threshold between what was and what will be.

Choosing life can be scary. Do it anyway.