

Choose life

It had been forty years since Israel, as a group of Hebrew slaves, were led by Moses out of Egypt. They experienced God's liberation from Egypt extraordinarily and unforgettably, and expected to enter the Promised Land quickly and triumphantly, the land flowing with milk and honey, where they would receive all good things from God. But they had to spend forty years in the wilderness before they could claim the country promised to them, forty years in which they were often tempted to go back to Egypt due to the lack of food, water and security.

The Israelites complained against Moses, saying "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." They were convinced that living in Egypt as slaves was better than living in the wilderness with uncertainty, and hoped that the Promised Land would be a perfect place that would provide everything they needed. Their best life was divided between the past and the future; the present was something to be merely endured.

Yet the life they truly needed to live was neither in Egypt nor in the Promised Land. The wilderness is where they've learned that they can live only if they listen to God. The wilderness is a school where the people of God learn who God is and who they are while they struggle to find their way. They experienced both life and death in the wilderness from generation to generation. Unfortunately, most of those who started a new life with the Exodus from Egypt died between the old home and the new.

Now the second generation of those who experienced the Exodus are listening to Moses's decisive speech, while they are standing on the far side of the Jordan River. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments."

Life and death are very real to them. They have seen the death of their parents and grandparents, and the life they all enjoy together when their God gives them manna, water and direction in their journey. It is their experiential learning that life and death, blessings and curses do not depend on where they live, how much they own, or how well they can secure their future, but depend on their relationship with God. After forty years of wandering, and before they get to the land they are about to enter, it is crucial for them to remember that it is not the land, but God who gives you life, and that you have a choice about where you turn to find your life.

What does it mean to choose life? For Jesus, it would be choosing relationships. In the Gospel reading today, he interprets the law of Moses, encouraging us to engage in making good relationships with one another. His point is that following the laws literally is never enough. The letter of the law is not the focus of the law, which is basically our relationship with God and with one another. You may think you follow the law and don't commit any sin, and you may think that's enough, but you are still lacking something: caring, loving, making reconciliation and peace. So Jesus wants us to choose relationship, not just the law.

What does it mean for you to choose life by choosing relationship?

When I was a kid, an elder of my home church was dying of cancer. He was very kind to everyone in the church. He taught me how to swim. My mother said that once I told her that I wanted to be an elder of the church like him. He was well respected and loved by all of the church family including my family. While many people were anxiously praying for him, he said to the congregation, "Please do not pray for me to be cured but to keep my faith in God no matter what happens to me." His face was never clouded with anxiety, but always calm and peaceful. His life, even though it was short, inspired many people in the congregation to keep their faith. Now I know what he chose; it's life.

One day, I was shopping at the 49th Parallel grocery store. I was in a hurry, so I did not pay attention to the cashier who was ringing up my groceries. We exchanged the usual greetings, the ones that everyone does without even thinking about it. "Hi. How are you?" And she said, "Has your baby arrived yet?" I was surprised. "Oh! You have a good memory. Yes, we have a baby boy. He safely arrived last

week. Thank you.” She gave me her congratulations sincerely with a big smile. She was not just a cashier anymore neither was I just a customer. We were friends because she chose to have that relationship with me.

Brett Younger, an associate professor of Preaching at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia suggests some good examples of how we can practice choosing life in our daily lives. Learn things you have told yourself you would never learn. Enjoy simple things. Play with children. Laugh often, long and loud. Cry when it is time to cry. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others. Surround yourself with what you love – whether it is family, friends, pets, music, nature, or silence. Walk around the block. Turn off the television. Get together with your friends. Invite a stranger to lunch or dinner. Clean out a drawer. Read a book of poetry. Quit doing what is not worth your time. Do something so someone else will not have to. Give money to a cause you care about. Stop arguing. Apologize to someone, even if it was mostly his fault. Forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it. Have patience. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth. Figure out what you hope for and live with that hope. Worship with all your heart. Pray genuinely. Love your church. Believe that God loves you. Remember the stories of Jesus. See Christ in the people around you. Share God’s love with someone who has forgotten it. Delight in God’s good gifts. See that all life is holy. Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort. Live in the joy beneath it all. Let God make your life wonderful.

Your presence here today is evidence that you have chosen life already, chosen to live in relationship with others. Choosing life is not a difficult job, but you need to practice. You can do it in your own daily lives, as God encourages us in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 to practice choosing life.

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”