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Deuteronomy 30: 11-20
Matthew 26: 17-30

From the Inside

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"Give us this day our daily bread," we pray, as often, probably, as most of us pray anything. As I like to say when introducing the Lord's Prayer, these are some of the words Jesus put in our mouth before ever we knew what words to say. The prayer for daily bread rises from one of the most personal and visceral places in us: our hunger. And if, as we heard last month, part of why this life is full of "new beginnings" is that the mercies of God are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-23) – so I think it is also true that this life is full of new beginnings because the hungers of humanity are also new every morning. So "give us this day our daily bread" is our daily prayer; and daily prayer for our hungers is our daily bread, new every morning as we awaken to the challenges and choices of any new beginning.

"See, I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse." Those words from the book of Deuteronomy (30:15) come from the mouth of Moses, as he stood with his people at the edge of the wilderness at last, overlooking the one last valley that they'd have to cross in order to arrive, finally, after all those years of wandering, at the place of their new beginning. After all they'd been through together, everyone must have recognized the truth of those words: how almost every day seems to present some opportunity to choose between blessing and curse, to choose life over death – even if you can't always tell, at first glance, which is which. There are opportunities every day to keep commandments or to break them – which is to say, to love or to fail in love; to weave the frayed strands of community together or to tear the fabric into pieces again; to walk humbly or to give in to arrogance; to revere and love that which is worthy of worship or to bow ourselves down before that which shrinks our souls; to speak words that free others to hope or words that tighten the bondage of fear or rub the wounds of anger. The choice between blessing and curse has been our daily bread since almost forever. Living is about making choices – and though the options aren't always easy to read, nor the path among them easy to discern, the challenge to choose life is our daily bread, and our hunger to live each day well is what makes it new, what makes it matter – what makes it life. And, says Moses, "This commandment is not too hard to follow, not too far away to hold, not too deep to understand. No – the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (30:14).

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Jesus recognized our hungers because he knew them from the inside. "We do not live by bread alone," he said to the tempter at the very beginning of his ministry when he himself was famished – "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). He knew that it's possible to have a full stomach but a hollow conscience or a stone heart. Over and over again Jesus taught us to choose carefully, to look for life among sometimes disguised options: to look for blessing in the choice whether to stop for the one in the ditch or to pass by on the other side of the road (Luke 10:29ff.) – to look for a neighbor in the wounded or disfigured or despised ones – to look for home even when you think you've turned your back on it forever and squandered all the love you thought there'd ever be (Luke 15:11ff.). "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly," he said (John 10:10); choose life, and live.

And at the end – when, as he said, the time was near – when at last they were on the outskirts of the city that, he knew, would soon choose death for him – when the time was ripe for a consummate choice of life, what he did was point into the gathering shadows of the city streets, and send his friends to find a room and set a table. The meal they would share was the ancient Passover ritual marking the start of the journey through the wilderness, a commemoration of the choice to follow God's lead out of slavery in Egypt – out of bondage, yes, but out into the night with Pharaoh's chariots soon in hot pursuit, a choice between blessing and curse in a moment of danger when it must have been hard to tell which was which. Jesus knew – and maybe his friends knew too, as they set the table, laid the bread in the napkin just so, filled the jug of wine as their ancestors had already been doing for a thousand years – maybe they knew that it would be their last meal together in one sense. But Jesus knew, too, that to be at that table commemorating freedom and remembering the beginning of a long journey toward promise was a way of choosing life again. Being at that table together was an indelible answer to the prayer, "give us this day our daily bread," a permanently renewable response to the hungers that rise from the heart of us on this wilderness way toward the place of a promised new beginning.

Oh, the shadow of death was in that room too, to be sure. Betrayal was in the air. "One of you will soon choose death over life," he predicted – which made everyone ask, <u>not</u>, "Is it him? Is it her?" but "Is it I?" because everyone knew how difficult it is, sometimes, to know what you're really choosing when you're making the choice. The traditional rap on Judas is that he was, simply, on the payroll of evil – and maybe it was that simple. But it seems just as plausible to me that Judas made the choice he did out of frustration, or anger, or despair – and which of us has not set a terrible course for ourselves when choosing to steer by those stars? The story seems to suggest that Judas didn't stay for the meal; so we have no way of knowing what difference it might have made to whatever Judas was hungry for if he had been there for the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup. But I know a church that, on Maundy Thursday, makes a point of breaking off a piece of the loaf and leaving it on the edge of the table – in case Judas might return, having finally recognized the choice of death for what it turned out to be. It's because the shadow of betrayal is always in the air that Moses reminded his people that the choice would always be theirs – ours. Choosing is our daily bread on the way to the place of a promised new beginning.

This summer we're reflecting, each Sunday, on new beginnings – because the sometimes wilderness world we live in these days seems to be calling us particularly to imagine new beginnings: to try to have confidence in the new life that God intends, and even to greet it with gratitude, with thanksgiving. On this first Sunday of the

month we celebrate again the way in which Jesus took his answer to our perennial prayer, "give us this day our daily bread" and embedded it in the midst of the gathering shadows of his death. And its worth noticing that his simple, unforgettable actions at the table his friends had set were also embedded in gratitude. He would have used the words so familiar to his people – *baruch atah adonai, elohenu melech ha olam,* blessed are you O Lord our God, king of the universe, for these gifts of bread and wine. But then, when they would have expected the ritual to move on to the bitter herbs, the salt water, the Passover lamb, then instead came words that fed a different hunger. I am this bread. This cup is my life – and I offer it with gratitude. I am here to feed your hunger; I am the answer to your prayer. My life is poured out for the forgiveness of all the choosing you've ever done that turned out to be grounded in frustration or anger or despair or bitterness or greed or fear or anything else other than love. This bread of my body, this wine of my blood – this is the choice that is blessing to you, and life, and length of days in the place of promise to which you are going. I am the daily bread to sustain your choosing life, he said.

And then, says Matthew, after they had finished the meal that was both utterly familiar and utterly new, "When they had sung a hymn they went out on the Mount of Olives." We don't know what hymn it was – though it seems likely to have been the psalm we'll hear when our own table is set, in a few minutes. They moved out into the night holding on to a song, because a song can keep gratitude alive even in the shadows; a song can be a way of choosing life and blessing; a song can be an answer to prayer.

Who knows what song they were singing as they left the table and went outside? I'm not quite sure why but that question was sort of stuck in my imagination the other day when I tuned in to an NPR station from home that I like to listen to – as they happened to be re-playing an Independence Day interview with Pete Seeger from a few years ago, telling stories about how he came to write "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" and "If I Had a Hammer." Then, as Pete got to talking about his friendship with the great Woody Guthrie, the strains of the song they wrote together began to steal in behind the interview. And then the chorus came swelling in – "This land is your land, this land is my land…" It was one of those live-in-concert recordings with crowds and crowds of people singing along, and Pete's quivery silver voice soaring over them all on one of those exuberant descants of his. I found myself riding the updraft of that voice – in the midst of everything that's been going on around us in this land, these days – and, as I listened, I realized that I'd never before heard that song from the edge of the wilderness; never heard it putting a choice out there as it does now. This land was made for you and me – and for them. This commandment is not too hard for you; neither is it far off. Therefore, choose life, and blessing – and continue on toward the place of a promised new beginning.

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This weekend I'm thinking about choosing as our daily bread, our perennial prayer – and I'm thinking about Bill Coffin saying that patriotism means loving your country enough to be critical of it. I'm thinking about that, and about leaving the table with a hymn to hold on to, riding the updraft of Pete's voice to get a good look at everything from the edge of what I hope is a new beginning. I hear Pete singing out danger, hammering out a warning, ringing out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land… and suddenly I can't help but think about how little I've understood justice, freedom, love between brothers and sisters as things I need to choose to hammer out, or ring, or leave the table singing about – how much they are part of the good news that this life that Jesus came to give us in abundance – this life was made for you and me, for them, for all of us.

At the center of our faith there is a man standing on the edge of a wilderness time among people who are weary of a long journey – a man of sorrows who, nevertheless, couldn't stop from being grateful as he broke his life open to feed our hunger, who even in the midst of the valley of the shadow carried a hymn away from the table, his silver voice rising like a descant over all our struggles. "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden," he said, "and I will give you rest." Take and eat; take and drink. This is for you. This land is your land – and their land. Come unto me you tired, you poor, you tempest-tossed who yearn to breathe free… This world – this life – this land and all its high hopes, and even in the midst of the shadows of betrayal – all this was made for you and me, for us, all of us. Therefore, choose life – *this is not too hard for you, neither is it far off* - therefore choose life, that you and all my beloved children may live side by side in the place that I will show you, the place of a promised new beginning.

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