

Psalm 119:1-8
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 CEB

Our second scripture this morning comes from the end of the book of Deuteronomy. This passage is part of a much larger address from Moses, most commonly known as his farewell address to the people of Israel. To give some context, Moses has been leading the Israelites through the wilderness after helping them escape from Egypt and Pharaoh. He's been their fearless leader, someone who has reprimanded them for creating false idols but was also their biggest advocate during their wandering. Well spoiler alert, Moses finds out that he will not actually cross into the Promised Land with the Israelites, he will die before then and a new leader will take over. So a lot of Deuteronomy is spent on long speeches by Moses reminding the Israelites what they have learned and how they can continue living as people of God. So with that context in mind, let us hear these words from Moses' farewell address to the Israelites...

“Look here! Today I’ve set before you life and what’s good versus death and what’s wrong. If you obey the Lord your God’s commandments that I’m commanding you right now by loving the Lord your God, by walking in God’s ways, and by keeping God’s commandments, regulations, and case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshiping other gods and serving them, I’m telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live— by loving the Lord your God, by obeying God’s voice, and by clinging to God. That’s how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our Lord endures forever.

Now if you're anything like me, you probably have a lot of thoughts in your brain about this text. You might be thinking, “well this is simple, of course I'm going to choose a life of blessing instead of a life of curses.” Or you may be thinking “but wait, this is terrible theology! What was Moses thinking! God doesn't bless good people and curse bad people, God loves everyone!” And you're right, God does love everyone. The retribution theology represented here and throughout Deuteronomy is one that most of us struggle with for a variety of reasons: because it's too close to the prosperity gospel that preys on the most financially vulnerable and in-need; because it shatters the idea of God's love and grace being freely given to us; because it just feels... not right when you think about it a little too long. It does make me curious though about Moses' command to “choose life” and how simple yet not simple that choice is.

When I hear the words “choose life”, many thoughts come to mind. I start hearing other words and phrases from the pro-life/pro-choice debate around choosing life and what that means for each side of that argument. I hear words and phrases from my favorite suicide prevention advocacy group “To Write Love on Her Arms” about why someone should continue choosing life over death and how much support there is out there for folks struggling with mental illness and thoughts of harm. Maybe you’re thinking of the “Choose Life” campaign from the 1980s that was an anti-drug campaign all about choosing these other aspects of life over using drugs.

So what did Moses mean when he told the Israelites “choose life!” Was it purely a statement on choosing to do good so they’ll be rewarded and not punished? Was it an early warning that there would one day be all these choices that could affect our lives negatively so we should always remember to choose life?

I think it may have been a little of both. For right or for wrong, what we call retribution theology was a way that the Israelites and their leaders explained a lot of what happened to them. It was one of their coping mechanisms that helped them come to terms with the bad things that had happened to them and would continue to happen to them throughout the rest of the Bible. It was a way of giving them hope during the bad times and a reminder to not let the good things go to their heads because one simple choice could change everything.

Moses’ command to choose life wasn’t just about not doing bad things like worshiping other gods and creating false idols, though that’s an important part. It’s also a call to remember God’s ways of justice, righteousness, and loving-kindness and how we are called to these same acts of justice not only as individuals but as a community. Because Moses is talking to the entirety of the Israelite people, not just a small group of leaders or believers. Moses’ call to action, to life, goes beyond the individual choice to the choices of an entire nation.

So how are we going to live out our calling to choose life, choose justice, choose righteousness, choose God’s loving-kindness in our world? While much easier said than done, it’s advocating for choices that benefit the entire community, not just one part of the community.

One way that’s particularly close to my heart this month is advocating for healthcare for all and more importantly affordable healthcare for all. Every January and February (when deductibles have reset), I’m reminded just how expensive it is to be disabled or have any chronic health concerns in this country, even with “excellent” healthcare. And these ever-rising costs are not because technology is rapidly changing so we need to keep up with research and development. It’s not because the base materials are expensive, so of course the product will be expensive. It’s pure greed from for-profit companies and institutions that don’t care about hurting individuals as long as they continue to bring in absurd amounts of money off their life-saving products.

Following Moses’ command to choose life in this instance is to choose a path that advocates for those who are being taken advantage of, for those who are paying more than \$300 for a bottle of insulin (*that only costs \$6 to make*), or who are risking using an expired epi-pen because it’s too expensive to buy a new one each and every year, or who are stuck in a job that drains their joy because at least it gives them healthcare...

And while I could choose to focus just on healthcare for diabetics, or healthcare for Presbyterians, that wouldn’t be taking Moses’ call and ultimately God’s call to its full potential because that would leave out huge demographics that are also being harmed by for-profit healthcare.

I say all of this not because it's easy, not because we're going to hear this and get it right from here on out, but because it bears remembering that our choices do in fact matter. They may not matter in the sense that God will bless or curse us like the Israelites were taught, but our choices can make a big impact on our community if we work together for change. It takes a choice to not only learn about the harm going on, but to actively work against that harm and help others to actively work against it.

And I see First Pres doing that hard work. Our mission grant team is actively working towards determining a goal for how many grants they want to give out to local organizations and what areas of need they hope will be addressed through these grants. Needs like inaccessible housing, access to mental health resources, or investing in tutoring programs that help young folks graduate from high school and have a higher chance of ending generational poverty for themselves and their families.

So this week I want to encourage you to think about what choosing life means to you. What needs do you see in the community and our nation that need our attention? What choices can you make that will help address those needs? What are your circles of impact that can grow into a larger circle of impact?

God calls us to some pretty hard work of justice and righteousness, fortunately God doesn't call us to that work alone. We have one another to lean on as we make this simple yet hard choice to choose life.

Amen.