

Sermon Notes for 2/12/17 (Epiphany 6)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Theme: WHAT CHOOSING LIFE MEANS FOR US

The Point: The call to choose life confronts us with our failure to love and obey God and drives us to the feet of Jesus, who fulfills the law of God on our behalf so that His obedience may be credited to us.

Introduction: (Having just read Matthew 5:21-37, today's Gospel reading) Whenever we have that reading followed by the statement "This is the Gospel of the Lord," I almost choke. There is not a smidgeon of Gospel in the whole section. It is Law thoroughly. Were it not spoken by the One who embodies God's Good News, we might be tempted to ignore it or to refuse to read it in church. The same thing might be said for today's text, the Old Testament reading for today. But we need to read it with our eyes on Jesus the Messiah, for then that reading takes on new life for us.

The book of Deuteronomy contains Moses' sermons and messages to Israel as the nation is poised on the brink of entering the Promised Land. They had experienced God's deliverance from Egypt some 40 years earlier – or at least some of them had. All who were adults at the time of the Exodus died in the wilderness during those forty years of wandering. Now a new generation had grown up, and Moses sought to establish in them the life of faith and service to the Lord.

Now, on the banks of the Jordan, just before Moses himself will die without entering that Promised Land of Canaan, Moses speaks and calls the people to "choose life." "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." This was a matter of life and death. He exhorts them to choose life. It seems to make sense on the face of it. After all, who would knowingly choose death? But the devil is in the details, isn't it? What did it mean for them to choose life? What does it mean for us? For this call of Moses to Israel is also God's call to each and every one of us here this day: "Choose life."

Fortunately, the context gives us some important clues. Immediately after this phrase, Moses goes on to spell out just what it means to choose life: "loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him." Here is what is involved with choosing life. It is not just a one-time decisive moment of our past that we can point to and celebrate, but it is a lifestyle, a calling, a vocation. Loving God, obeying Him, clinging to Him – this describes the everyday life of the believer, not just at one certain point, but living by faith in a determined, resolute, consistent, and unwavering manner.

But this is where we already come into difficulty. Our lives are shaped in very different directions, aren't they? Loving God does not have the priority that we are called to make it in our daily existence. I know that I have not loved God above all things in my life. All too often we find that we ignore God or are embarrassed by Him or even go directly against His will for us.

We love our own positions and reputations and authority enough to make loving God seem like a distant memory. We love our things and do everything we can to preserve and multiply them, whether or not God is given a thought today. We love our family and are intent on serving them even ahead of serving the Lord. We love our job and will do anything to keep it, even if it means compromising our relationship with our God.

How about our obedience to God? How is that shaping up these days? Listen to the words of Jesus from today's Gospel reading (a portion of the Sermon on the Mount): "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if

you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire . . . everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart . . . anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery . . . Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Do you find enough to condemn you in these words? If not, we could multiply them, you know, even from this one Sermon of Jesus: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . [or, the pinnacle of accusation] Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Have you kept any of these commands of our Savior? Have you kept them perfectly?

Nor is this simply a "whoops" on our part. This sort of disregard of God and of His commandments results in serious punishment. Moses told Israel, "If your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish." No empty threat was involved with this command. When Israel went after other gods and turned their backs on Yahweh, they did perish. The land was occupied by foreign troops, their cities were devastated, many thousands of people were hauled off into captivity, and Israel nearly went out of existence as a nation. Only God's grace kept them from being totally destroyed.

God's threats are never empty threats. He is serious about wanting His people to love, obey and cling to Him alone. Disobedience meets with punishment. No exceptions are made. God does not threaten and then wink at disobedience and ignore it. We stand in desperate need of some road of escape. How will we escape the punishment that awaits those who have disobeyed the heavenly Father?

Well, we will not escape simply by trying our best to do better, to clean up our act. You probably have a sense of how that sort of ambition ends up. Our salvation does not rest on the hope that we will become better, more loving, more obedient, more faithful people. We need a hope that is far more secure than that sort of wishful thinking, which will certainly be disappointed.

Our hope rests solidly on the promises of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus became our road of escape. He came and fulfilled the law of God perfectly. Last week's Gospel reading was clear on this: "Until heaven and earth pass away," Jesus said, "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." And it didn't. He kept it all. From His circumcision through His submission to Joseph and Mary, through His baptism at the Jordan, through His temptation in the wilderness, Jesus walked totally within the Father's will. When He hung on the rugged tree of Calvary, Jesus said, "It is finished." He had walked the entire road that the Father's will had required of Him. And He did it all, not for Himself (for He did not need it), but for you and me.

Jesus loved the Father over and above every other. The Father's will took precedence for Jesus over every other expectation that people had for Him. His obedience to the Father demanded a voluntary welcoming of humiliation, weakness, suffering, pain and even death itself. He clung to the Father when every other hope had faded. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," He said in expressing His confidence even as He was taking His last breath. Even when He sensed the abandonment of the Father ("why have you forsaken me?"), He would not abandon His hope in God's promises of life and victory.

Remarkably, our Lord assures us that everything that Jesus did – His perfect obedience, His willing suffering, His innocent death, and finally His victorious resurrection – it all gets credited to you as you trust in Him. David writes (Ps. 32:2), "Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against him, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." God counted our sins against Jesus, and He paid the full price for them as the innocent, spotless Lamb of God. So, God does NOT count your sins against you! For Jesus'

sake, you are counted righteous, your sins are discharged and buried in the depths of the ocean, never to be heard from again. For Jesus' sake, you get credit for His perfect obedience. No, you don't deserve it. None of us does. But this is the Good News, as stunning and preposterous as it may seem.

Choosing life means putting our trust in the One who alone is the Way and the Truth and the LIFE. As we rely on Him through our times of difficulty and even in our stubborn disobedience, we find that life is ours in the fullest sense possible. John put it this way: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath." Notice that it says "Whoever believes" (present tense, an ongoing way of life) "whoever believes has eternal life." It does not say, "will have eternal life" or "eventually will have a life that is eternal."

The present tense is used again here. "Whoever believes HAS eternal life." Right here and right now, you who trust the Son of God HAVE life that is eternal. Choosing life means that your life is pointed at God's priorities, not your own. His Spirit governs you, and everything about you is new. You have new desires, new attitudes, new perspectives, new allegiances, new confidence, new hope, new life.

Even death cannot undo your relationship with the living Lord. Death may stop your breathing earth's air for a short time, but life has won out in you forever. He who has claimed you in Baptism promises that you have eternal life, life that is secure in Jesus and that will never end. His promise is sure: "Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die." You are in Christ, and being in Christ, you possess everything that belongs to Him. St. Paul puts it like this: "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

As we trust in this One who is the LIFE, we also are privileged to work for life in our daily adventures. This may mean a lot of different things for each of you. For one, it may mean volunteering at a center for pregnant teens. To another, it may mean speaking up for life in the legislature. For another, it means hours in prayer for those who are working to defend the defenseless. To another, it might involve helping recently released prisoners to find homes and work and community. To another, this choosing of life may mean offering your abilities to help a child learn to read or to do math, assisting a young person dealing with addictions, reaching out to young girls caught up in sex trafficking. God's people do not need to fear when we tread into death's territory, for our concerns about life and death have all been dealt with in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Conclusion: The call to choose life confronts us with our failure to love and obey God and drives us to the feet of Jesus, who fulfills the law of God on our behalf so that His obedience may be credited to us. As we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us, we have the privilege of choosing life in every situation that we face. The threats of death and sin and Satan cannot throw us off this path that we walk with the Lord Jesus. And we are confident that, even when our choices may be off-center, we live by trust in the God who forgives us and considers us as clean and spotless as His own dear Son, by whose life and death and resurrection we do live – and we do choose life as well. AMEN!