

[10:30 only]

It is so good to have the Old Testament back!!

I omitted the Old Testament reading for the summer  
to try and shorten the service.

I'm not sure how much time we saved but I do know it reminded me  
how much I love the Hebrew scriptures.

The Pentateuch. Histories. Wisdom books. The Prophets. It's all so rich.

Christians rely on the New Testament to know the story of our salvation,  
but the Old Testament teaches us so much more  
about what it is to be human,  
what it is to try and fail and try again  
to be faithful to God across all the ups and downs of life.

Without the Old Testament we wouldn't really have the words  
to express our soul's longing for God.

We'd have the ending of the story,  
but we wouldn't have the beginning,  
and we wouldn't know why it mattered.

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This morning's passage from Deuteronomy has been one of my favorites for 15 years now and it feels as fresh and urgent today as I imagine it did when it was first recorded.

I set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.  
If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...  
by...walking in his ways and observing his commandments...  
then you shall live...and the Lord your God will bless you....

But if your heart turns away and you...  
are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,  
I declare to you today that you shall perish....

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To really get the power of these words you need to realize  
that God is speaking to 4 different groups of people this morning.

The first group is the people God brought out of Egypt.  
With Moses leading them, they survived 40 years in the desert  
and were finally about to enter the land God promised them.

But Moses had taken them as far as God would allow.  
It's time for a new leader to take them across the Jordan,  
and so Moses gives them one last gift:

"I set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity."  
You can choose to trust in God and follow his ways,  
or you can choose to pursue your OWN power,  
your OWN agendas, to choose your OWN gods.

The choice is yours. One way leads to life.  
The other way always ends in death.

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The 2nd group God is talking to shows up when you discover  
that this particular book of the Bible  
was actually written about 1,000 years after Moses died.

The word 'Deuteronomy' means "second law"  
and this second recording of the law was written  
1,000 years after Moses,  
when God's people were finally making their way back  
after their exile in Babylon.

They were finally home again  
and they re-told to themselves the story of Moses because, in a sense,  
they were entering the Promised Land a second time.

They were rebuilding their Temple,  
rebuilding their identity as God's covenant people  
and they needed to re-learn that they faced the same choice that day  
as they did 1,000 years earlier  
when they crossed the Jordan for the first time.

We can choose life, or death.

We can choose to live under the commandments of the Lord our God  
and walk in his ways,  
or we can choose yet again to live under our own power,  
choose yet again to worship false gods.

Once again, the choice is ours.

One way leads to life. The other way always ends in death.

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The 3rd group God is speaking to this morning  
is the group who has the hardest job  
knowing how to make the right choice.

That group isn't standing at the Jordan River with Moses,  
or gathered outside the Temple with Ezra.

The 3rd group is right here at Holy Trinity  
and in churches all across the world.

"Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people" on THIS day.  
The choice God gave 3,500 years ago  
is the same choice he gave 2,500 years ago,  
and is the same choice he's giving now  
to this parish, this state, this nation, this planet.  
"I set before you TODAY life and prosperity, death and adversity."

But I'll confess that when I go from looking back in the past  
to looking around at the present,  
the choices start to feel a little harder to discern.

Choosing between life and death isn't so simple  
when we're not talking about history, but about us.

What does "choosing life" look like for a country of 350 million people?  
Whose needs get prioritized? Whose get left behind?  
Everything has a cost.

Do we achieve our righteous agenda by trying to defeat our enemies,  
which right now adds up to about 49% of the country  
whichever side you find yourself on?

Or do we try to draw people together across difference  
and risk compromising our values for the sake of unity?

The answers don't look all that clear to me when real lives are affected,  
and yet over and over in our nation's history  
we can see the consequences of the choices we've made.

In the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Progressive Era...  
in the Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights movement...  
in 1968, and right now, in this angry, populist moment.

The stakes are high and the way forward seems uncertain,  
but God is always presenting us with a choice:  
Life and prosperity, or Death and adversity.

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Last Sunday I got up on my high horse  
preaching about some of the wrong choices we've made lately:  
raising up broken young men who kill innocent children,  
turning federal agents into ski-mask-wearing agents of terror.

It's important to name our failings sometimes,  
and I'll admit it felt good to say those things out loud.  
A lot of you told me it felt good to hear it said from the pulpit.

Then again, it always feels good to point out other people's sins.

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That's why this morning, the Eye of Judgment has one more place to turn,  
because God has one more group of people to speak to.

Well, not a group - it's YOU.

God is also speaking to you individually this morning.

YOU also have a choice to make.

In your personal life, in the decisions you make with your heart,  
with your body, with your time and money and energy,  
and especially these days with your words,  
what are you choosing? Life, or death?

To give yourself an honest answer, you have to go deeper than,  
“Am I following the rules?”  
deeper, even, than how something makes you feel.

God is asking you this morning to look at your life with honesty and clarity  
and discover if you are choosing a fundamental orientation towards  
life in Christ - a life of prayer, surrender, and obedience to God,  
a life of charity and service to neighbor and stranger alike?

Or really, is it all about you and yours: self-importance, self-reliance,  
self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement, self-pleasure,  
and most of all these days, self-righteousness?

Nobody here can answer that question for you,  
because nobody else has ever lived the life you’ve lived.

But the choice is real, and you can’t lie to God.

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Jesus offers the same choice in our gospel as Moses does in Deuteronomy:  
a life devoted to yourself, or a life surrendered to God.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;  
whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.  
Those who find their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Luke’s gospel Jesus uses the word ‘hate’ this morning, but Matthew’s version is more clear.

The paradox Jesus is showing us  
is that when we pursue our own blessings -  
that choice leads to death.

But when we choose God's ways -  
the ways of charity and grace and sacrifice - we find life.

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Moses and Jesus both show us what that kind of life looks like.

Moses knew he would never enter the Promised Land,  
and still he gave the people of God one last gift,  
one last piece of wisdom for the journey.

And so before Moses closed his eyes for the last time,  
God showed him the land he had given his life to deliver his people to,  
and then Moses rested in the Lord.

Jesus gave up his life on the hard wood of the cross,  
and by sacrificing himself Jesus was raised to new life  
and now has gone to prepare a place. For you.

My friends, choose life, no matter how scary it sometimes looks.  
Life for your loved ones, life for your enemies, life for strangers.  
Choose life, and life eternal will be chosen for you.

Amen.