

“Choices”

Deuteronomy 20:15-20

September 8, 2013

16th Sunday After Pentecost

Choices: we are confronted by them every day of our lives. Some choices are easy. Shall I wear the red or blue tie? Shall we have meatloaf or fish for dinner? Some choices are difficult. Which answer shall I choose as the right answer to this most difficult question on the first test of the school year? Which bills shall I choose to pay first as I wait for the next pay check to come in. Some choices are absolutely impossible. Shall I choose to fly to the moon or to Mars? You can't do either of them. In our text for today from Deuteronomy, the Lord offers his people choices about their relationship with Him. Are these easy choices? Difficult choices? Impossible choices?

Some have read this text to mean that the people had to choose to be in relationship with the Lord by their obedience and free will. By doing this, they would not only gain salvation but earn many blessings from the Lord.

Nothing could be further from the truth. This is an impossible choice. Sinful human beings are unable to choose God. Sin prevents any of us from choosing God, salvation, or blessing. I'm not talking about our individual sins preventing us, but our sinful nature. Despite the capabilities many people think they have in choosing God, the Bible teaches to the contrary. By nature, we are not predisposed to choose God. In fact, it's just the opposite. Paul says to the Romans, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot."

(Romans 8:7) To the Corinthians, Paul writes, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them." (1 Cor. 2:14) Left to our own devices, we will always and only choose to be in opposition to God.

But this is not the kind of "choosing" of which our text is speaking. With regard to salvation, the only choosing that is done is not us choosing God, but God choosing us. The context of our text is very important today. It is near the end (not the beginning) of the first five books of Moses. God had

chosen Israel, by grace, to be His people long before, beginning with the moon god worshiper named Abraham. They had not chosen Him by their free will or good works. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and led them through the water of the Red Sea. Now, they stood poised on the entrance into Canaan, the land with the Lord has promised to give to Abraham and his descendants centuries ago. They were already saved through God's choosing. Now they were headed into the Promised Land.

This foreshadows what has happened to us as God's New Testament people. We have not, did not, and could not have chosen God. God has chosen us, by grace, to be His people. Jesus says that in John 15, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." (John 16:15) Jesus chose humanity when He freed all of us from slavery to sin, death, and the power of the devil by offering His life on the cross as payment for those sins; overcoming the power of the devil by dying on the cross; and defeating death in His resurrection on Easter morning.

He chose you individually when He led you through the water of Holy Baptism. There, He washed away your sin, adopted you as His son or daughter, and brought you into His family. We are already saved. We don't have to save ourselves. We didn't have to choose God. God has already chosen each of us.

But that's not all. While there is no choosing to be done on our part before salvation, God makes it very clear that there are choices we have to make after salvation. There are choices we make in our lives as Christians – choices that involve consequences; choices that are sometimes difficult.

In our text, the people of Israel stood on the brink of entrance into the Promised Land. The generation of people who had left Egypt was dead. They had made wrong choices. They had disobeyed God's commandments. They had not trusted God. As a result, their dry bones lay scattered across the desert.

The Lord comes to His people – His people whom He greatly loved and had saved by grace – and presents them with a choice, “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.” Grace and the faith it creates are to result in action. One choice meant obeying the Lord’s commands and walking in His ways. The result would be life, descendants and blessing in the land which the Lord would give them. Another choice meant turning away from the Lord, refusing to listen to His Word, and being seduced to worship and serve the gods around them. The result would be certain death, no descendants, and no heritage in the Promised Land.

These are choices that Israel needed to make. They are important choices. They are also difficult choices. But they are choices which are needed to be made. The Lord says, “Therefore, choose life.” This makes it seem as if the people’s actions would bring them life. That’s not exactly true. They already had life in their Savior and Redeemer. The command here is more like, “Do not forsake the life you have.” By not forsaking the life they had, they and their children would love the Lord, listen to Him and obey Him, and hold fast in faith to Him

As God’s people today, standing on the brink of the eternal Promised Land given to us, we have the same choices to make: life and good, death and evil. In our lives as God’s people, with the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can choose to keep the commands of God and walk in His ways, resulting in life and blessing. As people who are still, by nature, sinful and unclean, we can also choose to turn away from God; refuse to hear His Word, and be seduced into worship and serve the gods of this age, resulting in eternal death and punishment.

The Lord urges us as He urged the Israelites, “Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days.” In other words, do not forsake the life already given you in your Baptism. Love the Lord. Hear and obey His voice. Hold fast to Him. He is your life and reward.

These are indeed difficult choices which have to be made. We should not ignore them or take them lightly. But neither should we despair over them. God has given us the tools in order to choose

life, not death and to receive blessing, not curse. He has given to us His Holy Word. His Word is not a collection of moral tales or a religious text book. His Word is power. If you want to know how to love the Lord, you don't have to guess. His Word tells you all of the things the Lord has done for you, is doing for you, and will do for you. If you want to hear His voice and obey, you don't have to make up your own moral code. His Word tells you what God wants you to do and what God does not want you to do. If you want the power to hold fast to Him in faith, you don't have try to do it yourself. His Word empowers you. This Word and this power come to you, not only in a book, but also in the voice of God's servant and in the bread and wine of our Lord's Supper.

In addition to giving us the tools to help us and empower us to choose life – to not forsake what has been given to us – God gives us opportunities to benefit from these tools. God gives us the Divine Service so that all of us of all ages can gather together to benefit from His Word. Here, we receive His forgiveness in the Absolution, His comfort in the preaching, and His power in the Sacrament. Today's text is a great text for Rally Day. God provides Sunday School for our children to hear, learn, and use the Word of God. He provides Bible Classes for our adults to do the same thing. In addition, we meet together as a family on Wednesdays where all of us can hear, learn, and use the Word of God.

We all have one last set of choices to make. They are not impossible choices, nor are they difficult choices. They are relatively easy choices because they are quite possible. They are choices such as: Choose to get up on Sunday morning and be in Divine Service. Choose to bring your children to Sunday School and Midweek School faithfully. Choose to attend Bible Class yourself. These are choices which we can make. These are activities which we can do.

When I, as your pastor, encourage you to be faithful in your worship attendance, to bring your children to Sunday School and Midweek, and to attend Bible Class yourselves as adults, please understand my motivations. I am not nagging you out of frustration nor am I looking to boost attendance at any of these events so that the statistics look better. I have great concern for all of you

and your spiritual life. I am simply echoing the Lord's words and encouraging you, in the midst of a world full of sin and death: "Choose life." There is life in God's Word and power in His life. Do not forsake what God has given you by His grace.

As the Lord spoke to His people of old, He speaks to each of us individually and corporately as a congregation, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days." God has chosen you, redeemed you, and given you life. What now will you choose? Amen.