

Preaching: Deuteronomy 30:16-20 “Life or Death...I Have a Choice?”

13th Sunday @ Pentecost, Proper 18

Sunday, September 4th, 2022 (Labor Day Weekend)

Text: Deuteronomy 30:16-20

¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

The text's intent

Moses speaks to those who have been chosen and called by the LORD to be His special people to live out that calling by worshipping and obeying the LORD alone and following His commandments, which included faithfully participating in the sacrificial system whereby the LORD poured out His forgiveness to them as they recognized and confessed their need for it through the offering of an animal sacrifice in their place. They are to hold fast to His instructions as to how to live as His set apart holy people. In doing so they would be blessed in this new land temporally, as well as protected from falling away as He worked to cut away the sinful desires of their heart and draw them back to Him more closely. But if they chose to follow their sinful heart and disregard His words of instruction, they would be choosing the removal of all the blessings mentioned which would become curses. The end result would be they would fall from repentant faith and be cast out of this promised land that was the LORD's gift. Moses calls them to choose life by choosing to live in repentant and obedient faith toward Him.

Focus Statement:

Our Lord who gave us life now desires that we enjoy that life in His presence now and into eternity. He has chosen us, called us to faith and desires we remain in that faith even though our heart makes sinful choices. He gave us His Son to forgive our sinful choices and His Spirit to keep us in repentant faith by pointing to His gift of the Law that shows us our sin, then pointing to the cross where that sin was taken care of. His Spirit teaches and encourages us to live according to His words and wisdom which bring blessings now and into eternity.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We didn't choose to be born into this life or born again into our life of faith. But we do have choices as we live out that faith as a Christian. We often make those choices according to the desires of our sinful heart, and not based on God's gift of His Word and Spirit given to guide us and keep us in repentant faith

What the hearer should do as a result:

Do our part to remain in repentant faith by choosing to make use of the means Christ has given us in Word and Sacrament worship, Bible Study, regular personal meditation and prayer, knowing that His Spirit is the One who keeps that faith alive through these means.

Subject Sentence: The LORD Chose Us, He Moves Us to Choose Him Daily

Introduction

One of our members was telling me a story of a lesson he had to teach his granddaughter. They were shopping at Kohl's, a good store for clothing and shoes and even school supplies for a young lady like her, but not necessarily for toys. Yet it was a toy this little girl wanted and needed to have **right now**. Grandpa told her that if she waited patiently, he would take her to Walmart the next day where she could pick out whatever she wanted from the toy section there. You and I know that waiting and going to Walmart would be the better choice, but she just couldn't see that. She had it in her mind that she needed to walk out of that store with something that very moment. So, as they checked out, she spied something on display there, put there as an impulse buy, for a young girl just like her who just had to leave with something. She picked up a squishy toy. Nothing very special. Certainly not as worthy as the dolls or toys that she could choose at Walmart. But since she just had to have something, she begged grampa to buy it for her. He told her that if he did buy it there would be no trip to Walmart and no chance for a better toy tomorrow. She wouldn't listen to reason. She whined and begged, and so he bought it for her. But by the time she got to the car she realized that what she got was not very good, was not very fun, was not even close to what she could've gotten. She told him "I guess I really don't want this anymore." Grampa took the toy out of her hand and threw it out the window of the car, where it landed in the parking lot. As they drove away, she said dejectedly, "I hope whoever finds that likes it."

She had a choice to make that day and she chose poorly, and that choice had consequences that were hard to bear. We have choices that we have to make in our lives every day. Sometimes we make good choices, sometimes we make bad choices, sometimes we make uninformed choices.

Saturday night I had a Fantasy Football Draft. What that means is I had to choose from among all the active players on all the NFL teams today which ones I wanted to make up my Fantasy Football Team. For those who may not know what this about: the object is to fill your team with best players for each position on offense and pick the team with the best defense. When the season starts my team will compete against another team in my league each Sunday to see whose team performed the best. That is decided by awarding points to each player according to how well he played. The more passes thrown, the more caught, the longer the distance thrown, the more yards the player runs, the more points each player is awarded. At the end of the day all the points from my players are added up. If my players earned more points than my opponent, then I win. So, I needed to choose the players I think will perform the best each Sunday. I had to do this while competing with 10 other people who also wanted the same for their team. I had to make choices, but perhaps they weren't always the best-informed choices. My pastoral knowledge is not helpful when judging which players will have a good year, which will not, and which may be taken out of the picture due to injury. And for me, being a Pastor, means I don't have the same amount of time as some of my competitors to know who will be the best. Very often I make what turns out to be poor choices.

Now none of these choices, which football player to choose, or whether or not to wait to choose a toy, ranks up there with the choices that Moses is laying out for Israel in our Old Testament Lesson. He is laying out spiritual choices that will affect their life now and their eternity to come. He is telling them to choose life or death. And what they choose will directly affect their life in the Promised Land they are about to enter.

God Commands We Love and Obey Him

Our Old Testament Lesson comes from Deuteronomy, which actually means “2nd Law”. This doesn’t mean that Moses was giving them another set of laws different from what they received at Mt. Sinai. This book is Moses’ farewell sermon in which he reminds the people of those laws they and their parents had been taught throughout their time in the wilderness as well as what the LORD had taught them as consequences for their poor choices, their sinful disobedience along the way. While we may view the law at times as a bad thing, or maybe as a necessary evil in our lives, here Moses portrays God’s laws and instructions as His gracious gift to them. Their lives are a gracious gift from God. The Promised Land is a gracious gift from God. All these are precious gifts that none of them earned or deserved. In God’s laws and instructions, He provided all they need to know and do to make the most of their new life in the Promised Land, to be fruitful and multiply and have abundant health and happiness. Choosing to obey the LORD will mean they have sufficient rain for bumper crops, enough livestock to provide clothing, food, and other necessities. They would be strengthened and enabled to conquer the people living in the land, and then they would live there in peace, free from worry about other nations conquering them.

All these things would be provided by the hand of the LORD, His gift to them. What did they need to choose in order to receive these blessings? **Deuteronomy 30:16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.** To receive these blessings, they were to obey what God commanded them. And how does one successfully obey what God commands? **Deuteronomy 6:5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.** When they loved the LORD God so much that they allowed Him to have that number one spot in their lives. Then as they lived out those lives in the Promised Land, they would look to Him and remember Him and His laws and commands. These would be their guide in all the choices they would make in their daily lives, His instructions on what to do and what not to do. Living obediently for the LORD would mean life would go better. The same is true for us this day. If we kept God number one in our lives and seek to obey His instructions and commands, then life would go better for us too.

Now obeying the commandments day in and day out is a tall order. Especially when obedience, as pointed out by Jesus includes not just what we do, or say, but even what we think. You might be able to control what you do or say to some extent, but wait until someone cuts you off in traffic, or you get into an argument with your spouse or friend, or when someone posts something you don't like on Facebook, then see how long you can refrain from sinful thoughts. We react and make sinful choices because we choose something else besides the LORD to have first place in our hearts. We no longer love God with all our heart and soul and might because we love ourselves instead and desire what pleases us. And that causes us to make poor choices, worse than picking a squishy toy over something better. Worse than picking a bad fantasy team. If we allow the LORD to remain number two, or even less in our lives then we are choosing life apart from Him now, and eternal death to come.

God Chose Us and Redeemed Us From Life Of Choosing Sin

Keep in mind this truth when it comes to the choices you have in your life of faith. Israel never chose God, He chose them. He chose to redeem them from slavery in Egypt and give them the Promised Land, both gifts they neither earned nor deserved. He chose to love them, even though at times they did not show love and faithfulness to Him. He knew it would be impossible for them to daily and successfully choose obedience. That's why among His instructions given to them included His gift of the sacrificial system. Israel was to know what God commanded, see the ways in which they fell short, and seek His forgiveness and mercy by offering an animal for sacrifice. This animal took their place and died the death they deserved for disobedience. They needed to offer animal after animal because they committed sin after sin, and as they did this, they were confessing the extent of their sinfulness. And they were to know that an animal in and of itself is not sufficient payment for their sins. But they were to trust in the LORD's mercy, and through the gift of the sacrificial system remain in repentant faith towards Him, trusting His promise that these sacrifices looked forward to a more perfect sacrifice to come.

And that perfect sacrifice is Jesus Christ. He is God come to earth to become one of us so that He could be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He chose to come to save them and us from our sins and the punishment they earn for us, separation from our Creator God now and for all eternity. You didn't choose Him; He chose you and sent His Spirit to you through the words of the Gospel and the word joined with water in your baptism. He chose to give to you the faith you need that connects you with all Christ won for you in His life, death, and resurrection: forgiveness of sins, salvation from the kingdom of the devil and a place in God's kingdom now, with eternal life to come. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, you are given new hearts and minds that desire to obey our Lord and Savior, and desire to give Him first place, hearts that can begin to choose life and not death.

How and Why We Choose To Obey

Just as with Israel, we are God's chosen people. And He has chosen through His gift of faith to give us new hearts that can begin to choose to love and serve our Lord. And just as with the people of Israel, we do this when we choose to obey His commands, and thus be obedient children of our Heavenly Father. Of course, to be obedient means we must know what He is commanding us to do so we can make informed decisions. That means we must know and study His words of law and instruction which are the Holy Scriptures. Moses preached His farewell sermon to remind the people of Israel what God had commanded of them. Our Lord gives to us not just Moses' sermon, but all of the Scriptures, so that we might know what it means to think, talk, and act in obedience to our Creator and Savior God, what it means to sit in the honored seat as His bride in His kingdom.

And it is here in this area that we have choices to make in our life of faith. We can choose to serve and be involved in His kingdom or choose not to. We can choose to come to Church on Sunday or we can stay home. We can choose to join in Bible Study here at Lamb of God, or in our homes with our friends and neighbors, or spend our time doing something else for ourselves. We can choose to begin or end our day with personal devotion and meditation or seize the day getting right to work on what matters to us the most. We can choose to use our God given talents to help out with ministry on Sunday and throughout the week, or we can choose to spend our time on our own ventures. We can choose to share our faith with others around us or keep it to ourselves. None of these choices in and of themselves will earn for us forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. That can only be given to us by God Himself as His gracious gift. But in each of these ways, when we choose to please and serve ourselves, we are limiting and inhibiting the ways in which the Holy Spirit works to keep us in repentant faith, to keep us trusting and loving the Lord our God more than ourselves, to keep Him in the number one spot in our heart.

Your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave His life for you and desires that you spend your eternity with Him. You have choices in your life of faith that can have eternal consequences. For that reason, the Holy Spirit doesn't leave you to make these choices on your own. He is there with you, encouraging you to choose life by choosing to obey God's call to spend time with Him in His word, in His presence in worship, and to share the gifts He gives you with others, especially the gift that is the Gospel. When we begin to choose to make ourselves and our needs more important, He convicts us with His words of law to show us the ways we are removing God from that first place. He allows troubles and worries, sickness and disease to touch our lives to shake us out of our self-centeredness, and then sends His Gospel of forgiveness to turn us back to Him in repentant faith. Through His Gospel promises He installs Christ back on the throne ruling your hearts where He belongs.

Conclusion

How well I chose my Fantasy Football team remains to be seen. If previous years are any sign, then it will probably be another mediocre year. Those decisions thankfully, through uninformed, have nothing to do with my eternal destination. Like that granddaughter I sometimes choose what seems good for me at the time, but is not what the LORD wants me to have. Her grandpa had something better in mind for her. He chose to teach her a hard lesson, that it is important to listen to what grampa is saying to you, and it's important to wait for something better to come along. While she didn't get to go to Walmart, she did get something better. She received his forgiveness, and with it a gift better than a toy, special time riding bikes with her Grampa!

Our Lord and Savior truly wants what is best for us. He chose us to be a part of His kingdom now and for eternity. He wants us to choose to love and serve Him with our lives. He knows like that granddaughter we will at times choose to please ourselves instead of obeying Him. So, He continues to give to us His law to show us our poor choices, and His Gospel where we receive forgiveness from all our bad choices through His perfect choice of dying and rising for you and for me. Left to ourselves we would choose death, eternal death apart from Him. But He doesn't leave us to ourselves. His Spirit is at work in you to keep you in repentant faith through which you begin to love and serve Him. As you live out your life in His kingdom, choose life, choose to grow in faith, choose to be involved in all the ways the Spirit promises to work in your life, knowing that He remains at work to keep you in steadfast faith unto life everlasting. Amen.