

“Choosing Life”

a sermon by

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**Text: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ...”
(Deuteronomy 30:19)**

N.T. Wright, a bishop in the Church of England, has just written a book entitled: *After You Believe, Why Christian Character Matters*, in which he calls for virtue – that is moral strength – as the best way forward through our troubled times.

To be certain, virtue or moral strength is not limited to Christians. Many societies and religions uphold moral values such as truth telling, integrity, patience, self-control – just to name a few. N.T. Wright mentions Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa, as a person who did not present himself as a “Christian leader.” He was, however, an extraordinary human being, who, after 27 years in prison, had learned the virtues of patience, dignity, and self-control, and was able to lead an entire nation through a troubling period.

But character does matter for Christians. The Christian life, as described in the New Testament, includes such virtues as love of the neighbor, integrity, honesty, truth-telling, and the practice of forgiveness.

I.

This morning I read from a portion of the book of Deuteronomy, which is a series of speeches given by Moses before the people of Israel entered into the “promised land.”

There is something unique about the Book of Deuteronomy. It is a part of the “Pentateuch,” the first five books of the Bible. The word “Deuteronomy” means “second law” and that is a clue to

its nature. Deuteronomy is a series of speeches given to the people of Israel after they had been liberated from slavery in Egypt, crossed the Dead Sea, and were on the verge on entering the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is written as an address to the people of Israel to inform them of how God intends for them to live in the land God has given them.

However, as most scholars of the Old Testament know, the Book of Deuteronomy was written much later. In fact, it mirrors the reforms of King Josiah in the Seventh Century B.C. It offers the people a “second chance.”

The Book of Deuteronomy offers Israel a choice. Israel can obey the will of God and experience blessing and life, or they can choose to disobey God’s commandments and receive cursing and death.

The text for this morning is as good a summary of the Book of Deuteronomy as one could find: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Chose life so that you and your descendants may live ...” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

As Dr. Patrick Miller has pointed out in his commentary on Deuteronomy, there is a certain sense in which this book is relevant to every generation. We are almost three millennia from this situation but it is as contemporary today as it was those many years ago.

II.

Today, we find ourselves facing a number of choices between “life” and “death.” One is the care of the environment. Our nation is facing what may be a catastrophic natural disaster as the effect of an oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico threatens the ecostructure of the entire Gulf Coast.

We are facing a choice between “life and death” in terms of our dependence on foreign oil. As Thomas Freidman has pointed out on a number of occasions, our dependence on foreign oil supports some of the most repressive regimes in the world.

There is another choice between “choosing life” and “choosing death” and that has to do with ethics in the business world. The financial crisis of the past two years has forced us to realize that unless our financial institutions can be reformed, we will continue to live under the threat of financial ruin.

But it is not just our nation that faces this decision between “life” and “death.” The church faces this as well. The mainline Protestant churches, which contributed so much to the founding of this nation, now suffer from staggering losses of membership and divisive issues which threaten to tear us asunder.

In a situation such as the one we face today it is imperative for us to ask ourselves what are the necessary choices we must make if we are to choose life and not death.

III.

The first is that, as a Christian Church, we must recover the roots of our faith. That was the issue for Israel. They had ignored the law given to them at Mt Sinai (Horeb) and had disobeyed God's commandment.

The great problem that the church faces today is that in a desperate attempt to appease our society we run the risk of losing the one thing that makes us distinctive, i.e. our faith in God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

The Reformed (or Presbyterian) faith has always placed a great deal of attention on a theological center that was rooted in the conviction of God's sovereignty and the primacy of grace. As Presbyterians, we have always viewed God as a majestic God. The God we worship is not our "buddy" or our "pal." He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

The theocentric character of Reformed faith sets it over against every ethic of self-realization, against inordinate concern with the salvation of one's soul, against excessive preoccupation with questions of personal identity.

Or, to put it another way, our faith is in God. It is more than mental assent. It is the confidence that is born of personal assurance that God is sovereign.

But the Reformed faith influenced this country in many profound ways. Presbyterians believed in the "sanctity of common life," that is to say that every person was important and every job was important. For Martin Luther and for John Calvin, each person is given a calling by God. It may be medicine, law, business, ministry, or it may be homemaking, brick laying, or any form of manual labor. The point is that every job has the potential of becoming a calling.

One of the ways that this was experienced was the "Protestant work ethic." Anyone who knows the life of John Calvin knows the value he placed on work. In his lifetime he wrote commentaries on almost every book in the Bible, wrote the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and maintained a vast correspondence with Christian and secular leaders all over Europe. But, fundamentally, John Calvin was a pastor. He preached twenty times a month, visited the sick and dying, dealt with difficult church members, and administered a public school system and a university.

Today, the work ethic has been replaced in many places an ethos of "entitlement." Too many people lack a clear understand the necessity of hard work and sacrifice.

IV.

The second is that as a Christian Church, we must place a priority on the ethical dimension of our faith. Within the Old Testament there are a series of precepts and commands. There is the "moral law," which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. John Calvin recognized the validity of the Ten Commandments as a guide for Christians. They teach us not only about our relationship with God but also about our relationships to our neighbors.

The choice that Moses gives us is a second chance. We can either obey the law that God has given us and find life, or disobey that law and experience death.

This past Monday Ross Douthat wrote a disturbing article in the *New York Times* which he entitled “Not Even in South Park.” It was reference to the Comedy Central television program “South Park,” which is a form of shock comedy. Over the years the writers of this television series have attacked almost every religion and institution in this country. But recently they crossed a line when they aired a program that made fun of a number of religious figures including Jesus, Moses, Buddha and the prophet Mohammed, which they referred to as “superheroes.”

Most viewers wrote it off as just another tasteless episode of what is essentially a tasteless program. But some in the Islamic community were not willing to let it pass so quietly. One website predicted that the writers of South Park would end up like a Dutchman by the name of Theo Van Gogh, a filmmaker who criticized the religion of Islam and was subsequently murdered.

As Douthat points out, our culture, which has very few taboos that cannot be violated and that trashes on a regular basis its own standards and values, has found a foe not easily intimidated.

The result was that the producers of the show “South Park” immediately pulled the plug on any references to the prophet Mohammed and erased all former episodes of the “superheroes.”

As Douthat points out, “this is what decadence looks like: a frantic coarseness that ‘bravely’ trashes its own values and traditions and then knuckles under swiftly to totalitarianism and brute force.”

Now fortunately, this is not the Weimar Republic and these would-be totalitarians are small in number, and more of a fringe element in Islam than anything else.

For that we should be grateful. Because if a violent fringe is capable of inspiring so much cowardice and self-censorship, God help us when we have to face a real enemy.

V.

Today, like ancient Israel we stand in the wilderness, and like Israel we are given the choice between “blessing and curse” and between “life and death.”

To “choose life” is to choose that we will be faithful to the great heritage that has been given to us. To say “yes” to the lordship of Jesus Christ is to say “no” to every false idol that is not Jesus Christ. To “choose life” is to say that we want our lives to reflect the values and ethics that have defined our faith: love of God, service of our neighbor, respect of ourselves and of other people, honesty and integrity in the home, in the school, and in the work place.

To “choose life” as a church is to affirm that we will not be distracted by crass and self-centered culture but that we will insist that the fundamental mission of the church be strengthened: worship, education, pastoral care and outreach. That is our mission and we will not be diverted from it.

This past week, the *Wall Street Journal* published a review of a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Eric Metaxas, entitled *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. In this important work the author notes that Bonhoeffer's life and story have been captured today by many revisionist historians. Atheists such as Christopher Hitchens praise Bonhoeffer for his "admirable but nebulous humanism." Liberals exalt his social conscience while setting aside his belief in sin and judgment. Metaxas sees in Bonhoeffer a complex and provocative figure, who was part of an attempt to assassinate Adolph Hitler and who paid for this treachery with his life. At the end of the day, the author argues, Bonhoeffer was an orthodox Christian who at a grave historical moment, rejected what he called "cheap grace" – belief without bold and sacrificial action.

In "Bonhoeffer" Mr. Metaxas reminds us that there are forms of religion – respectable, domesticated, timid – that may end up doing the devil's work for him.

If Deuteronomy is right, then we – like ancient Israel – stand at the crossroads between life and death.

May God give us wisdom and courage that we may choose life and in doing so find the destiny to which we have been called.

Amen.