

Choose Life in the Here and Now:
A sermon on Deuteronomy 30:15-20
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Choose life...so that you and your descendants may live. Choose life...so that the earth may live. Choose life...so that there may be a better, brighter future ahead of us.

The scripture chosen for today by Keith, Cindy, Linda, Sandra, Donna and others working with Green Buildings Now is a special one. It comes at the end of a speech put in the mouth of Moses, standing overlooking the Jordan, on the brink of the promised land...and at the end of his life.

Of course, any scripture that we read is doing a delicate dance between the story with which we are presented, and the historical context in which it was written. And both aspects of this scripture passage are important to us today, as we read in light of the realities of climate change, wondering what we can do to combat it.

So let's go to the story first. You remember that Moses was a great prophetic leader, that he led God's people out of the land where they were enslaved, through forty years wandering in the wilderness. Moses is also a figure shown in great tension, as Pastor Mario illustrated recently when he talked about Moses in between the Red Sea and the Egyptian soldiers coming after his people. In the few chapters prior to our scripture passage today, Moses is making one of his speeches that challenges God's people to discern their identity, stay true to their values, and weather the times of transition in the life of their community with unity and grace, holding firm to God's invitations to love the Holy and neighbor. There is even a passage early in chapter 30 where the voices of children of future generations are heard as they look at the destruction that has come to the land and the people and wonder if anything could have been done to prevent this outcome. "Why did the people choose this path?" the voices of the future ask. "Couldn't they have made a different choice?" And then Moses' own voice returns, telling them plainly that the community is at a crossroads. And directly after this speech, Moses says, "I am 120 years old! I can't move around like I used to. This community has to make this choice."

And what choice is that? Well, the historical context of the book of Deuteronomy gives us a clue. The book of Deuteronomy, the 5th book in the Torah, was completed around 560 BCE, during the Babylonian exile. You may remember from our Godly Play story about the exile that the community of Israel had split into two kingdoms, the Northern one of Israel and the Southern one of Judah. By the 6th

century BCE, the northern kingdom had collapsed, leaving Judah exposed and vulnerable to invasion by groups that sought the land's wealth for themselves. In 586 BCE the Babylonians took over Judah and deported many residents of Judah. This resulted in several generations of Judeans being raised in Babylon, with no memory of their ancestors' land except for the stories and scriptures that were passed down to them. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary says, "taken in the context of its origin, the Deuteronomic movement had striven desperately to avert the disasters that had befallen the surviving kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. In its aftermath they found a land that was economically ruined, politically divided, and spiritually demoralized."

And, as communities do during times of great strife and trauma, the writers among them tried to make sense of the chaos by telling stories that would serve to center and guide the community, often told in the words of prophets and honored forebears.

And so we have the story of Moses, at the edge of the promised land, reminding the people to cling to their God, to remember their history, and to move forward with intentionality in choosing to be people proclaiming liberation. But, *they had to a choice to make*. Just as the people reading the text in a time of exile had important choices before them. Just as we do today.

And the text gives us the choice in pretty stark language. *If you ignore God's invitation and worship something other than God, you will surely die. If you choose life, your descendants will have a future.* In our Thursday Bible study this week, as we talked about this passage, we wrestled with the dichotomy in the language--- Muriel rightly pointed out that as this choice is presented there is no middle ground, no grey area, only "good" and "evil," "this or that."

So it can seem in our world, in our society, in this USAmerican context, today. So much division. Any of us could name a number of concerns in the world and be able to articulate the polarization—climate change, racism, anti-Blackness, homophobia, anti-Semitism, transphobia, classism, ableism, capitalism, war, media polarization...the issues go on and on and on. And it is important to reiterate, as many of us remind each other quite often, that these issues are all connected—to each other, and to each of us. All of these issues are overlapping, because we are people with multiple layers of identity that affect how we live in this world and how we affect each other. When one of us is suffering, all of us are suffering. And so though today we are focusing on the dangers of climate change and the grief brought about with climate change, I am not saying that this issue is more important than any other issue. There's no need to play the "oppression Olympics" or argue over "who has had it worse in life," when our planet is on a track to

become inhabitable to human life. All that threatens human life is linked, and all that threatens human life affects us.

And so we, reminiscent of God's people listening to Moses in the scripture, are at a crossroads. We are faced with choices about caring for future generations and protecting those most vulnerable to climate catastrophe. At the same time, we face questions about our identity and the meaning of community as we observe the world around us and the chaos that our shifting biosphere is experiencing. And the wisdom of Moses says, "choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

We wonder: what does "choose life" mean in a time when biodiversity all over the globe is being threatened by extinctions caused by human threats to habitat? What does "choose life" mean when we have had over a month of smokey skies in this very city? What does "choose life" mean when residents of island nations and low-lying coastal areas are forced to become refugees due to rising waters from melting glaciers? What does "choose life" mean when so many people in my generation name impending climate disaster as they consider whether or not to have children? What does "choose life" mean when the very soil that forms the ground we walk on is compromised by toxic chemicals, oil and gas? What does "choose life" mean when microplastics are found at increasingly high rates in breastmilk? What does "choose life" mean when our elected leaders, who have the power to legislate environmental protections and curtail pollution, pay more attention to the welfare of the banks and corporations than to the people living near toxic waste sites?

Beloveds, "choosing life" in the context of climate justice is a complex question anytime, but especially now as we are already witnessing the effects of humans' destructive habits...and many are still hesitating to change course.

In our Bible study conversation on Thursday, Carole asked about the part of our scripture that says "the heavens and earth witness against you" --which felt particularly poignant as I wrote this with all my windows closed to keep out the wildfire smoke. One commentary I read said that this part of the text served as a sign of the eternal consequences of the choice that the community was being asked to make.¹ What's different for us reading this scripture in light of climate change is that we are aware that, while the heavens and earth may witness and bear the marks of the destruction and devastation right now... the planet is resilient. Nature adapts and regenerates. That's what it does best.

It's *humans* that are particularly vulnerable. Humans that live as if we are completely separate from the planet, unaffected and unaffected. Particularly in USAmerican culture, and furthermore, white USAmerican culture, we have

¹ Robert Alter's Hebrew Bible translation and commentary

practiced being separate from the land and water and skies—and each other—for so long that shifting our thinking to interconnectedness instead of disconnectedness, from separate to integrated, from disparate parts to wholeness—will take *retraining, almost rewiring* our brains.

Because this either/or thinking that characterizes so much of USAmerican culture eliminates the in-between grey areas of human vulnerability. And in truth, humans exist mostly in the in-between.

The situation with our changing climate is dire, that cannot be overstated. So much is at stake— air quality, water quality, the orcas that call Puget Sound home, the songbirds, the bumblebees that pollinate our food, the lives of those who are children and youth right now, even the survival of our species. The situation is dire. Dramatic action needed to be taken yesterday, or 70 years ago, when Rachel Carson and the mothers raising babies near toxic waste sites began to sound the alarm.

But, as one commentary says, “despair of the future is a kind of social disease...hopelessness generates despondency. It deenergizes and dehumanizes persons so that they no longer reach to grasp the possibilities that life brings. It generates impulses of self-pity and self-condemnation.”² And, beloved church, *let us not give in to that social dis-ease of despair of the future.*

So, given that we are where we are, and we are who we are, we must wonder: where do we go from here?

And that is exactly the choice that Moses’ speech lays out. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary says, “[this speech] makes clear that, by the grace of the LORD God, Israel’s renewal is a genuine possibility; it thrusts aside the objections that could be raised again trusting in this possibility; and it uncovers and refutes the unspoken thoughts of despair and disillusionment the people secretly nursed.”

Moses’ speech is one that recognizes human vulnerability. And so we must, too, even though it brings grief and fear. When faced with such daunting challenges, one response is to retreat into apathy and live a life of cultivated hopelessness. “There’s nothing we can do, so nothing matters.” “Nothing will change anyway, so why don’t I just focus on consumption to numb the pain?” “The ultra-rich pursue money above all else, so in the time we have left, I’ll do that, too.”

But into this hopelessness, Moses calls to the people: “Choose life, love your God, obey God and clinging to God.” This is reminiscent of other parts of Deuteronomy,

² New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary

namely, the Shema beginning Deuteronomy 6:4: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.”

What does that love look like, dear church? Think no further than Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” And let’s also add to this conversation, that greatest commandment “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Choose life, for the sake of those who inherit this planet after you.

Beloveds, in these commandments we hear attention to human vulnerability—*not just accepting vulnerability but living fully because of the beauty of vulnerability*. When thinking about the dangers of increasing extreme weather events and the effects on our neighbors living close to the margins, we must ask ourselves: what does choosing life by doing justice look like here? What does loving mercy and walking humbly with our Creator call us to do in the face of devastating hurricanes in Puerto Rico, flooding in Pakistan, drought in the Sahara, wildfires in the Cascades and resource wars in the middle east? Let us love ourselves, not with a spirit of supremacy that places us over and above others, but with a spirit of community that allows us to live in human vulnerability and protect each other with a special attention to those who are most in danger.

Pastor Mario shared with the Bible study on Thursday that “Mother Earth is telling us that life needs to be liberated” --not just wealthy, white, capitalist lives, flourishing while so many live without homes...not just USAmerican lives, securing our borders and only caring for our own... *life itself is crying out for liberation*. David Bloom pointed out that the way we get there is by doing what we can, with what we have, where we are. Considering the opportunities for action that make steady, meaningful changes and affect a positive future: using sustainable energy, consuming less, pursuing housing for all, recycling and reusing our material goods as much as we can, voting and advocating for people and policies that curtail corporations’ polluting. Mobilizing our resources of time, energy, knowledge, finances, property with a goal of sustainability and supporting those who have fewer opportunities than we do. Living locally, where we are, engaging in our communities, knowing our neighbors, doing our small pieces in each of our small corners of the world. And, as Carole Cornell reminded the Bible study, white USAmericans have much to learn from indigenous communities and communities of color that have prioritized community care, interdependence with nature, and ecological systems thinking for generations. We must pay attention and listen and learn with humility.

As you think about what you can do, with what you have, where you are, remember never to underestimate the power of community. Muriel reminded us that it is often the people who have the least material resources who share the most generosity, so hear the good news that *we all have something to contribute to* this struggle for climate justice. Mary Jeffers called us to listen to those who are young, and choose to nurture the children among us, so that they would be raised up to be healthy, wise, kind and generous stewards of our collective resources.

Beloved church, it will not do to keep our heads in the sand about climate change and the disproportionate effects of it on vulnerable people, communities of color, poor people. But at the juncture of despair and apathy or choosing life so that there may be a future for those who come after us, let us choose life...in the here and now. And let us choose life abundantly, so that we and those who come after us and our siblings the orcas and the whole creation will have a future. May it be so. Amen.