

“The Choices We Make”

*Deuteronomy 30:15-30; Psalm 119:1-8, I Corinthians 3:1-9;
Matthew 5:21-37*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Every single day, you and I are making choices. We are choosing when to rise, what to eat, what to wear, when to leave for work, how to get to work, where to park, how much coffee, tea, pop or water to drink, when to eat, what to eat, what to read, what to

say when we interact with our children and grandchildren, who to respond to on Facebook or Instagram, who to tweet and retweet, what to read or watch on TV or our iPads, and on and on until we reach the time of day when we lay down our heads and decide to go to sleep. These are just a microcosm of the choices of choices we make each day from before the sun rises until long after the sun has gone down.

Our choices are not always profound – although they may be and more than we imagine are extremely profound. Some of our choices – both subtle and extraordinary - may be transformational. We make choices to do drugs or not do drugs; to smoke or drink or not smoke or drink. We make choices about the quality of life we want to live and then how to live it. These choices are often driven by our deepest experiences, values and most treasured beliefs. Many of these choices are not about “what” but “how.” They are about “who” - who we choose to spend valuable time and energy with; with whom we give ourselves over in deep and heartfelt interactions. They are about “where” we go, “what” we do and “when” we get there. These choices are about what words we choose when we speak and what we say. They are about who we listen to and how we respond?

Some of them are huge choices about how we live our lives. What choices do we make for “the common good?” What

choices do we make to be generous and giving? What choices gives us life, hope, and joy? To whom and with whom do we give ourselves in love? What cause, what issue, what candidate (in 2020), what person or people do we walk with or follow, to whom do we give our best to serve and reach as we see needs? Here are transformational choices -or they can be.

And essentially, all the choices we make really matter. They determine if our lives matter and how our lives matter.

In Deuteronomy 30, we meet Moses – the greatest Biblical leader of people (outside of Jesus). He is also the longest serving leader in the Bible. Here he stands on the edge of the Promised Land and the edge of his own mortality giving his final sermon. At 120 years old, he speaks his last words. His amazing and magnificent life included being saved as a hidden Hebrew baby discovered on the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter, being raised as Pharaoh’s son, killing an Egyptian soldier, fleeing for his life into Midian, herding sheep, marrying a shepherd’s daughter, seeing a burning bush which wasn’t burning while hearing God’s voice calls him to liberate the Hebrew people, returning to Egypt, liberating his own people from slavery, leading them through the Sea of Reeds and all over the Sinai Peninsula (read “Mountain DESERT”), and of course, receiving the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai. He spent the first 80 years getting his people out of

slavery in Egypt and the last 40 years getting Egypt out of his people.

Finally, in Dt. 30 he chooses his words carefully as he speaks to God's Chosen People on the edge of God's Promised Land, he will never enter himself. He places all the important choices of life on the table. Most fundamentally – Moses places **the choice** for *“Life and Good and Death and Evil”* right in front of their faces.

In his final sermon he commands, warns and witnesses.

He commands them to choose “to Love GOD and to Walk in God's ways.... to make choices to Keep God's commandments, regulations, and rules so that they will really come alive and live blessed lives.” **He warns them to choose** “to listen to God, to be obedient to God and not to go off chasing other gods – a choice that will cause them to die.” **He witnesses to them about their choices.** *“I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you today: I place before you ‘Life and Death, Blessing and Curse’. Choose life so that you and your children will live.”*

The expression “Choose Life” has become hijacked in the 20th and 21st Century. It has become the taffy pull of the Right to Life and Pro-Choice Movements. Both, well-meaning movements, have decided to make “choose life” an expression which determines whether you have staked your claim with a

woman's right to choose or the life of an unborn fetus. The biblical mandate to choose life is much more than that, although each of these movements of choice have deep and abiding values at their core.

To Choose Life is to make choices - moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year which affirm your life, the lives of others and life on this planet for all creatures and all lifeforms great and small. To choose life is to affirm that certain choices give life and certain choices take life away. It is that simple and that complicated.

The choices we make are reflections of the blessings and curses referred to throughout scripture. In the law code of Deuteronomy in the first 29 chapters of the book, the author is constantly reminding people that "blessings and curses, life and death visit all people." In Hebrew, the word *barakh* commonly translates to "blessing" and is a standard invocation to prayer ("Bless ye the Lord") and is used in benedictions for giving thanks and praise to God, not only for God's benefits, but also for such misfortunes as one is called upon to suffer. The common belief is that not only can God bring good fortune or misfortune, blessing or curse, upon a person, but that this power is invested - albeit indirectly - in humans who can invoke God's blessing or curse on others. The Hebraic tradition lives deeply in the beliefs that "the curse of a sage - even when undeserved - will

come to pass (Berakhot, 56a), and that one should never regard lightly the blessing of an ordinary person” (Berakhot, 7a).

Blessings and curses both come to pass and pass by in themselves. This is so true – and it speaks to the fact that what we say and do really matters in our little universe and God’s immense universe.

This truth is like the parable of the man who held a precious and rare bird cupped in the palm of his hands. He knew that if he continued to hold it tight, the bird would eventually suffocate. However, if he opened his hands the bird would fly away and he would lose it forever. So, he asked a wise man what to do in this dilemma. The answer came back, “*it is as you will it.*”

So often the blessings and curses of life are as we will them. If we hold on to our blessings too tightly, we suffocate them and they become curses. If we let them go, they fly away and we lose them to the winds of time and change. The same, though is true for curses. If we hold them tightly, they suffocate us. In our pain and in our suffering, if we release them too quickly, we fail to learn from them. They may or may not glance us, but they do not impact us for change.

In the New Testament, blessings are frequent and curses are rare – largely because of Jesus’ words not to curse another. Perhaps the most well-known blessings are found in the Sermon on the

Mount, part of which I read today from Matthew's Gospel. Although Jesus teaches us to "*Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you,*" (Luke 6:28) he was not beyond proclaiming grief or "Woes" when faced with the curses caused by those who were rich and acted unjustly to the poor, who were well fed and mistreated the hungry, who laughed in the face of others' pain, or who allowed others to falsely speak well of them, for the false prophets had done the same in generations past (Luke 24-26).

A large part of the choices we make come down to our moral and ethical core values. Our choices come down to several simple questions. Will we acknowledge and celebrate the abundance of life that God has given us? Or will we constantly and consistently be crying for ourselves about the scarcity of our lives and our lack of having all that we need? Are we joyful people of abundance (as God calls us to be) or scared people who cry about scarcity all the time? Who are we choosing to be?

I am reminded of a story I heard years ago. There were parents of twin daughters. The one daughter always saw life as beautiful and good and full of promise. The other twin always complained about having too little, being left behind and not being treated fairly by her mom and dad. On their 10th birthday, the parents wanted to bring balance to their daughters. So, when the positive

daughter wanted a pony for her birthday and the negative daughter wanted a computer, they tried a new approach.

On the birthday of their twins, they got the best possible computer and all the technology their daughter would need for happiness. When she opened the door to her room, there it was. She immediately started complaining that it wasn't enough. It was missing some key equipment and the quality they chose wasn't the best. Nothing had changed. She chose a path of negativity.

For their other daughter, they filled a room full of horse manure – that was all. When she opened the door, she was elated. She jumped into the manure and she lifted it in her hands. She turned to her parents and said, “wherever there is this much manure, there has to be a pony nearby!” With manure flying everywhere, she finished, “*Thank you, mom and dad, you have made me the happiest girl in the world!*” Nothing had changed. She chose a path of positivity.

What do you see when you look at your life – or for that matter – our life together? Do you see abundance or scarcity? Do you see problems or possibilities? Do you see blessings or curses? Do you see life or death? Do you see good or evil? Do you only see manure or do you imagine a pony?

In a few minutes you will leave this room. You will step out of here and begin a new week. What choices will you make this week? Amen.