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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Pro-Life

This is Moses' third speech throughout the book of Deuteronomy. It can be said that he is trying to prepare the Israelites for their new life in the promised land by calling them to repentance and to a new devotion to God's laws.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

These were thoughtful and reflective times for the people of Israel and especially for Moses. He would soon die and so he wanted to make sure that his children were prepared for their long-awaited entry into the Promise Land.

Up to this point it hadn't gone well for the Israelites. As a people they had spent the days of their youth wandering the desert acting like children. Building golden calves, arguing about inheritances, and generally disobeying and throwing tantrums. When would they grow up?

Class with Kenda Dean...

Part of this answer is subjective because many students rightfully noted that certain experiences sort of catapult kids into adulthood—or at least to *feel* like an adult. But when asked to answer with an actual age, the spectrum was kind of astounding.

On one end, folks thought that plenty of teenagers are actually adults from as early as 17 years old. On the other end, we had people saying that “real adulthood” doesn't begin until the age of 30. And this is the kind of confusion that younger generations live with as they make their way through life. When does one stage end and the next one begin?

One theory I have about childhood is that caring about the time of day is something children don't really worry about. When I was a kid, my day wasn't really ordered around the clock, it was ordered around activities and fun. What time is it? It's ten snakes till tree climbing.

I have found myself striving to preserve for my daughters the gift of indifference to the time of day. Sound crazy? I never said my theories were reasonable! I suppose it's normal to want your children to have the best childhood possible, because one day they are going to be adults and have to contend with the clock day in and day out.

As Moses and the Israelites stood on the borders of Moab, eager to enter into the Promised Land, they were very aware of the time. After generations of slavery and decades in the desert the hour was finally upon them to cross the threshold from one stage of life to the next. Did they learn from the past?

And so, for almost the entire book of Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to them about God's law and the people's failure to keep it. It is a masterful, first-person account of God's love as expressed through the Law. The Law is not meant to oppress; on

the contrary, the Law is meant to tell us how God loves us and how we are to love God and our neighbors.

Chapter 30 in the story of Deuteronomy represents a fundamental shift in the timeline of the Israelites. There's no confusion here: they are at the end of their years wandering the desert as children and are about to inherit the land promised to them by God. As long as they are willing to live like adults.

Moses decides some reflection is in order:

"You have seen all of these things take place, many of them terrible and filled with death. Your generations and genealogies are filled with war and strife. Now that you are about to cross over to the land I promised you, will you still choose the same path that led to your constant struggle, or will you make your choice based on the Lord's exceeding love for you and for all people? The choice is yours: life or death. Choose life".

So, what happened? Well, spoiler alert: even though the Israelites entered the Promised Land they didn't always make the best choices and eventually mucked up the Law again. Just look at the gospel passage for today, Matthew chapter 5.

See, the followers of Jesus were like the Israelites. They, too, had the wrong idea about the Law and just like Moses, Jesus gives his hearers of the Sermon on the Mount the same lesson:

"You have heard it said... but I tell you..." Just like Moses, Jesus tried to teach his hearers that God's law was vastly superior to the whims of human nature. God's law brings life, humanity's greed leads to death. Choose life.

And, what happened? Spoiler alert: look around the world today and decide whether or not humanity has taken heed of Jesus' teachings.

Alas, we are like the Israelites and Jesus' disciples. We are also hearers of God's law and we, too, have choices to make. And like them our choices can either lead us to life or death.

And becoming an adult is largely about being able to make the right choice no matter the circumstances. This can be very difficult. For example, I've chosen to ignore my wife's advice to put back some of the ice cream I dished out because that eating so much in one sitting would upset my stomach.

Choices to move on from a job or from a relationship can have profound consequences for individuals and families and whole social circles of friends. We can choose to be kind or rude; forgiving or begrudging. Every day we choose the words we say to others, to nurture anger in our hearts or softness in our spirits.

Nations make choices, too. They can choose to save or to kill, to provide or to withhold. They can choose to protect or abandon, stay the same or evolve with the times. Nations choose to elect or reject, build walls or tear down barriers, give or hoard, plant or destroy.

And yet, we are like the Israelites. We look back on our collective lives to see and try to understand our choices. Some of our errors are obvious: we have enslaved, denied others their basic human rights, we've been unnecessarily angry, hateful, and cold. We've lusted and desired what is not ours and our hearts have been prone to violence. Parts of our past have been deserts—devoid of life, barren wastelands of shared idolatry and guilt.

But... take heart. For we are also like the Israelites because we too stand on the threshold of the life that is possible and that God imagines for us, if only we would choose it. The promised life could be ours if we make the choices spelled out for us by Moses and by Jesus:

- Leave your pride at the altar and be reconciled with your brother or sister
- Do not judge your neighbor
- Do not break promises
- Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul & love your neighbor.

How do we get there? How do we take that first step across the threshold?

One concrete milepost on the journey to adolescence and adulthood is when kids learn how to apologize and, more importantly, when they can articulate *why* they

are apologizing. “Because you told me to” is not a reason to be sorry, just like, “Because I got caught” is also not a good response though it can be pretty honest.

But if we hope to grow up as a people and as individuals, we must take seriously the practice of repentance. In fact, before the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter 4 the very first thing out of Jesus’ mouth as he “began to preach” was “Repent”. It would remain a cornerstone of the gospel message and it remains a basic feature of life in the Promised Land.

Moses also teaches his people about repentance. And it’s more than just a suggestion. As he begins his own sermon, Moses uses the Hebrew word for repentance *seven* times and in seven different ways in the first ten verses:

to repent, to restore, to return, to come back, to take to heart, to again obey, and to again delight. It is clear that Moses is setting up the action of repenting as a prerequisite for even considering the commandment to choose life. “Unless you repent, you won’t even be able to imagine the life God is offering you.”

Repentance isn’t a popular, marketable idea. It’s not going to win us any points with folks who would rather focus on more pleasant ideas like blessings and peace. We’ll never see a “time for seeking repentance” in place of the exchanging the peace of Christ during a worship service. Could you imagine if before the sermon I invited us to seek out forgiveness and reconciliation from one another? And yet that is *exactly* what Jesus says in our gospel passage: leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled with your brother or sister.

In order for the Israelites to choose life, and in order for them to move from their childhood in the desert to adulthood in the Promised Land, they must repent and return to the gifts that God had offered them through the Law: to love God and to love neighbor. It is such a fundamental piece of our humanity that Jesus took up the same message generations later as he prepared for his ministry and then as he began to preach.

As we look back to our past and the ways of our childhood, heaven and earth are witnesses to the choices we are given. The gospel of Christ invites us into a time

of reconciliation so that we might then, and only then, enjoy the Life that is promised to us.

Sisters and brothers, take to heart God's precepts: repent, return to them, and be restored. Then Lord will again take delight in you, your people, and your nation.

See, I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.