

What Does The Lord Require?

Choose Life

FEBRUARY 12, 2017; 6TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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The scripture lesson today comes from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 30, verses 15–20. Listen now to a Word from the Lord.

DEUTERONOMY 30:15–20

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.

This is the Word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

In the early 40s, as the Russian army spilled over into Latvia, Livija Rutowski's family had to leave their home. Leaving all she knew in the small town of Valka, at an early age she learned what it meant to "have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity." She was made a refugee in the tumult of war. Throughout time and history, all around the world, death and adversity through systematic persecution has overtaken life and prosperity.

Livija's grandmother took her family into her home further west, in the port city of Riga on the Baltic Sea. Now three generations, they worshipped at the Lutheran Cathedral. One night after she'd said her prayers, Livija remembers becoming deeply concerned. She ran down the hallway to her grandmother saying, "Grandmother, we prayed to God to take care of us in Valka, but now we live in Riga. Please, we must pray again and let God know where we are." Her grandmother assured her that God knew where she was and that God would care for them in their exile.

Today, in the foyer of Livija's home at the Glenmary, a framed colorful rooster painting hangs on the wall. Earlier this week, as we passed it I asked, "Does this rooster have significance?" And she smiled. She shared the memory that in her grandmother's church in Latvia, a weather-vane in the shape of a gold rooster used to sit atop the steeple until the Russians came and stole it in the occupation.

History reports that Pope Nicholas, I, decreed in the 9th century that all churches must show the symbol of a rooster on its dome or steeple, as a symbol of Peter's betrayal. The pope desired this to be a reminder of how easy it is to bow down to other gods, to run with the injustices of the day, turning away from God.

Livija's faith was nurtured in the confidence of a matriarch who assured her that God would be near to her. Livija's faith was also shaped by the disappearance of that particular symbol on the church that cautioned those who crossed over the threshold to the truth of how easy it was to turn away from God, and turn towards betrayal, like Peter, who betrayed Christ three times, with each crow. A symbol in the life of faith became very important for Livija.

We are three weeks into a sermon series on Micah 6:8 which asks, "What does the Lord require? Each week we have been reminded of our response as the people of God, "To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God." Today, through scripture we explore as set forth in Deuteronomy, what it means to choose life, not death. As the people of faith, to choose life is to obey the Lord, our God, and his commandments.

Obedience can be such a hard thing because it means we cede our control, we give ourselves over to another authority. The authority in today's text is God's, and God's alone.

Sometimes we're just not interested in obedience. I remember when our children were younger and they didn't like the "invitation" to obey us as their parents. They'd squinch their eyes shut and pretend we weren't there, shutting off all listening.

In today's scripture, Moses conveys his hope that the regularly disobedient children of Israel, who had cast golden idols and doubted the Lord's presence, might stand still and face the justice awakening in this threshold moment.

God had brought them out of Egypt;
 God had brought them safe thus far;
 God called them to obedience to his commandments.

For it is in that practiced obedience before God, with hearts turned to God, that life comes. Choose life, and blessings. Not death and curses.

In today's scripture lesson from Deuteronomy, the children of Israel stand at a threshold. They have come to the boundary of the land that God has promised to them and to which Moses has

been leading them. Moses knows that he will not cross over with them. Today's words are his last teaching, his imploring to the Children of Israel.

The Dixie Chicks have a ballad entitled, "More Love" I imagine Moses singing some mashup of the lyrics of that song to the children of Israel, "... Let's be still for just a minute, try to open our hearts. Let's stand in the justice of this moment, realizing God has brought us safe thus far and this calls for obedience to the law - which means, more love. More love to flow in between us, to guide and to guard us."

And then I realize I'm living in a Disney world of show tunes where all my dreams could come true. If only it had been that easy for Moses, and if it were that easy for us. In his book, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, Michael Eric Dyson says that "Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public."¹

A few years ago, Idlewild's BASIC youth group traveled to Nicaragua on a Mission trip. BASIC stands for Brothers And Sisters In Christ. Toward the end of the week, a few of the advisors walked to the center of town in search of cold Coke Zeros. They crossed dusty streets and empty handed, they walked out of small shops. As they continued their search in the town, they turned a corner and saw a decent sized crowd lining the street, waving and watching a parade go by. They stopped to watch.

As one float turned the corner, the entire parade came to a standstill. It took a moment for them to recognize the figure. A blindfolded Nicaraguan woman, stood in the middle of a flower-covered float and held handmade scales in either hand. A small sign read, "Justia."

The figure was Lady Justice. She radiated patience and confidence, humility and compassion and most of all, trust. Her face was relaxed, though her focus was razor sharp as she kept the scales balanced. The church advisors had literally been stopped in their tracks by Justice.

As the people of God, every day presents a threshold over which we are invited to step in obedience to God. And I wonder, if we have awareness to that threshold? I wonder, do we know what it means to be stopped in our tracks by Justice?

When we choose life, as Moses suggested to the people of Israel, at such a threshold, our lives radiate love. We are patient and rightly confident in faith, humble and compassionate with others, trustworthy and kind. We turn from fear and judgment of others. We live lives of balance before God in gratitude and faith, trusting that where we have come from, and where we are going, God has and will be there.

We are called to live out our faith day by day. And, because Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public, we are called to a long obedience to the Lord, our God.

Moses spoke to the children of Israel and reminded them the covenant at Sinai, of the use of the law as a guide for a life of faith. By obedience to the law, our lives radiate love. In his book,

Strengthening the Spiritual Life, philosopher Nels Ferre encouraged that “Christ is the love incarnate that casts out fear. As sure as Christ is Christ a real Christian breaks down barriers among groups at home, among the churches, in the communities, and to the ends of the earth.”

Moses invited the folks to choose life.

Jesus said it a little differently. He said, “And the greatest commandment is to love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus was not offering love, for love’s sake, he said, “I ask your obedience in these things that my joy might be made complete in you.”

Recently while visiting Livija, a member of our congregation, she reminded me of the first time we met. Almost 15 years ago, she brought by a sapling of a tulip poplar she’d nurtured from seed. She brought by the “baptismal tree” - a ministry of the Nurture Ministry Unit when a newly baptized infant is given a tree sapling, a symbol to remember one’s baptism, about how one is to live in the world - rooted to earth, and awed to heaven ... I might say, as a reminder to what the Lord requires, to choose life. This sapling is now taller than our home.

In the great commission at the end of the gospel of Matthew, words we speak at baptism, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me - go therefore and baptize all nations - baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AND, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded, AND, ... remember I am with you to the end of the age.

We are called to live life out with courage and balance face to face with others in the movement of this world, in obedience before God. We are called to do justice.

We are called to trust in God’s loving kindness as our hearts spill out and flow into the hearts of others. We are called to love kindness.

We are called to walk, and to humble ourselves, literally to be made low, always and forever in relationship with the Lord, Our God. We are called to walk humbly with the Lord our God.

We are called to choose life.

Might it be so.

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¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, p.100.