

"The Choice"
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Preached on July 6, 2008

Moses said to the people, "We have a choice." That is most fitting for this weekend because we are celebrating Independence Day. Sometimes people say that July 4th is the birthday of our nation, but it's not. Actually, it is the day on which we proclaimed that a new type of nation was going to spring to life. A nation based on personal freedom. It was the day of our conception, a conception based on the principle that in life we have a choice. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." We believe that we have the freedom, the liberty to choose the life that we will live. We believe that we have a divine right, given by the very hand of the Creator, to speak, and assemble, and worship as our heart dictates. On July 4, 1776, we, as a people, said that we were so committed to that principle that we were willing to die for it. It was our choice, and we still have a choice. That is what Deuteronomy tells us.

Deuteronomy means "two laws," and that is the gist of the message. Two laws. If we follow the law of the Lord there will be life. If, however, we follow the law of our own making, if we follow the gods of the land, there will be pain and death. It is just that simple. Moses preached what Led Zeppelin sang: "There are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on." If we follow the Lord there will be blessings; there will be life. But we have a choice. We get to choose the path we will take in life. But with the right to choose comes the responsibility to accept the destination to which that path leads; to accept the consequences that go with it.

As we head into the future we, like the children of Israel, are going into an area, into a land that we do not know. We continually run into new people and new situations, experiences of both pleasure and pain. We wonder and we worry, as the Israelites did, if the Lord is truly going to have the power and passion to watch over us; to provide for us; to take care of us and the congregation in which we dwell? Will we be safe and secure in His arms? But when each new day dawns, the same choice is always before us: Do we follow the commandments of God or not? And once we choose, are we prepared to accept the consequences of our actions?

There are many people who deny not only that God is real, that our salvation is possible, but that we have any choice in life at all. Can we truly choose the path we walk and the actions we take? Some believe that we were programmed to act a certain way, and that we cannot depart or change that programming. John Calvin, the theologian and founder of the Presbyterian Church, was one who believed whole heartedly in predestination. In the extreme, it says that humanity has no free will because God controls all our actions, and our destiny. We have no choice

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when it comes to accepting or rejecting the commands and the grace of God. Many people around today still think that way. Something bad or difficult happens in their life and they begin to wonder why God would do such a thing to them. But in my opinion, the reality is that both good and bad experiences are influenced a whole lot more by the choices of humanity than they are by the omniscience and omnipotence of God.

Understand that Calvin was brilliant and dynamic. He started a denomination and had great influence on reformed Christian theology. Calvin pointed to various scriptures to come to the very well informed opinion that when God created the universe, different categories of people were created: those who would accept Jesus as their Savior, and those who would not. Now as I see it, some people must accept that conclusion because they do not see the point in evangelism because God has already determined the outcome, so there is no reason to evangelize. But I have difficulty accepting that opinion, for that says that Jesus only died for some and not all, for some had no chance to receive grace, and I can't imagine God thinking that way. God, the Father, is not the mafia's godfather, who goes through life making things happen with favors handed out and judgments handed down. The godfather determines who will get what. That view says that on every occasion, God is before each and every individual saying, "I'm going to make you offer you can't refuse." But we can refuse. There are two laws and we have a choice.

Still there are opposing views. What newspaper can you pick up that does not contain a horoscope. People read horoscopes to find out what sort of day, week, or month they are going to have. Some believe that life is foretold, that our future is written in the stars. In the movie "A Knight's Tale", a peasant struggles with the prevailing thought that we "cannot change our stars." Our fate is sealed, and we can only know what that fate will be if we learn to read the stars. We do not have a choice. If the paper's horoscope is not detailed enough, we can go to web sites or 900 numbers to have our personal horoscope calculated. Or we can get scientific and check our biorhythms. Maybe we can have our palms read, or our tea leaves read, or the bumps on our head analyzed to discover what our future will be. And to believe all this you probably have gotten a few bumps on your head and perhaps should have that head analyzed. But all these things are based on the idea that the future is preordained, that we do not have a choice. But I say to you, we have a choice, and the choices we make will determine our destiny.

We can and we will make the future what we want it to be, not with our words, but with our actions. And that future will either be in harmony with the Word of God, with the will of God, or it will be in dissonance. Either we will choose to follow the

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Creator God, the God of Grace, the God of Life, or we will follow the gods of the land. We've got a choice.

But who or what are the gods of the land. In the days of Moses, they were the nature gods, the fertility gods of Baal and Asherah. In modern day language, they are the gods that offer power, prosperity, and sex. They are still the gods that many worship. Fame is a recent god in our land, a god of growing popularity, fueled by the worship services known as "reality shows" like "American Idol" and "Survivor". We see fame being worshiped when teens or adults do foolish, violent and dangerous things so the video can be shown on U Tube. Another big god in the land is time. Decades ago political protester Phil Ochs wrote, "And I'll send all the money you ask for, but don't ask me to come along." That line is being lived out big time because these days we worship at the altar of time.

According to the late George Carlin, the god of our land is "stuff." And worshipping the god of stuff starts real early for as soon as we are born well meaning people begin to give us stuff. Parents dedicate a significant amount of space, usually a whole room just to hold our stuff. Some of our stuff we leave out for the whole world to see and some we hide in drawers and closets. Parents keep little books dedicated to the memory of our first stuff, like shoes, cards, pictures, certificates. We never want to forget about that stuff. Stuff begins to fill our bedrooms to overflowing and soon we need another room, a playroom or living room to store our stuff. It even spills over to other segments of our life. As kids we would be out with our friends. Then our parents would ask us what we were doing and we'd say, "Stuff." "What stuff?" "Just stuff. Normal everyday stuff."

As we grow up and leave home we take most of our stuff with us. We might leave some at home because we know mom and dad will take good care of our stuff. And when we leave home, we make sure that we have an apartment or house, someplace where our stuff will be safe. After all, a house is nothing more than a cover for our stuff. The more stuff we have, the bigger house, the larger cover we need. And we always make sure we lock the doors because we know that if some thief comes in they will definitely take the good stuff. They always take the good stuff.

No matter how much stuff we have, it is never enough. We are constantly looking for new stuff. When we get too much stuff, we begin to fill our basements, attics, and garages with stuff. Sometimes when all those places are filled we buy a new house, a bigger house which we immediately have to fill up with stuff, and since there is more room we can go out to get more stuff. And sometime, when all our nooks and crannies are filled with stuff, we put it out in our yards and on our

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
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porches. And people come and offer us money for our treasured stuff. Yard sales always work because we know that there are all sorts of people out there just waiting to get their hands on our stuff. It is the god of the land. And often we care more about our stuff, about our things than we do about the people we meet, their situation and their salvation. Those same people who are hurting, helpless, and hopeless because they have chosen to follow the gods of the land rather than the God of life. And they will know no other way unless we care enough to tell them.

There are gods of wealth and sex, gods of time and stuff. But the most common god we worship is ourselves. Often the rules for us are different than they are for all the people around us. What is forgivable for us is a source of judgment for others. Our problems our not our fault. We are merely the victim of circumstances. Not like others. They had a choice. If someone doesn't see us, recognize us, pay enough attention to us, they are arrogant and self-centered. But if we don't see, recognize, or pay attention to others it is simply an oversight. We mean no harm, not like those others who do not recognize just how wonderful we are. Any mistakes we make, if we make any mistakes, are accidental while the mistakes of others are intentional because they had a choice. They could have chosen to be like us, to be with us. They could have had the wisdom to follow us, just like we have chosen ourselves over all others. Instead they chose themselves over all others. Don't you see the difference? No, I don't. But I do know that we all have a choice.

In prayer, the word I hear most often comes from Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God." And often the Lord adds, "Which means that you are not." A constant message of Jesus was, "Deny yourself." Don't try to be the ruler of the universe. Be still and let God come through even you. Yet we try to stand in the place of God. We pray, "Lord, thy will be done, but this is what I want and expect Your will to be." The covenant prayer of John Wesley was quite different. "I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low by thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen." He had a choice, and Wesley chose Jesus. How about you?

We have a choice. We get to choose the god we are going to follow. We get to choose the life, the faith we are going to live. We get to choose the future we are going to build. We get to choose the mission and ministry by which we are known, by which this church shall be known. And if we choose wisely, it doesn't matter who

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stands in the pulpit. It doesn't matter who chairs the committees. It does not matter what style of worship, what type of music we prefer. It doesn't matter if we are comfortable with everything that happens. The only thing that matters is that the Lord of Life is dwelling in this place. It only matters that the presence of Christ can be found here. It only matters that the Word of God is preached here. It only matters that we are committed to give our life wholly and completely to Jesus as he has given himself wholly and completely to us. It only matters that the will of God be done in you and through you, in us and through us, now and forever; now and for always.

But we have a choice. Everyday we have a choice. For we stand on the brink of our future, a future that is filled with promises and pitfalls. We build that future one act at a time; one word at a time; one choice at a time. The question we need to ask is, "What god will we follow?" We can choose a god of prosperity or pleasure; a god of time or even our own will. We can worship a god called stuff, or we can choose the God who gives us the stuff of grace; the stuff of love; the stuff of hope; the stuff of life. We do have to live by the choices we make, but if we look closely, we will see that we can only truly live with one choice. If we obey, the future will be bright. There will be blessings and the glory of the Lord will shine all around. Who stands in this pulpit is not nearly as important as the God who directs your life; the God who calls you to mission and ministry; the God who stands in your heart; the God for whom you and this church shall live; the God who leads us into whatever the future shall be. But we have the choice. May we choose with wisdom. May we choose with grace. May we choose life. May we choose Christ. And in your life may it be so. Amen.