

Sermon

“Choose Life”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 2, 2023

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 16

- 1 *Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.*
- 2 *I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you.”^a*
- 3 *As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.*
- 4 *Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;^a
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.*
- 5 *The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.*
- 6 *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.*
- 7 *I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.*
- 8 *I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*
- 9 *Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.*
- 10 *For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.*
- 11 *You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

Deut. 30:11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 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. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 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. 19 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, 20 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.

- I. You will remember the competing versions of reality proposed by God and Pharaoh in the Hebrew Bible:**
 - A. God creates a universe that is filled with good things. Where God's people are invited to "be fruitful and multiply..."**
 - 1. In God's version of reality we are invited to live together in neighborly peace and mutual support because there is enough, and more, and more than enough — if we will share.**
 - B. But Pharaoh lives in a nightmare of scarcity.**
 - 1. He imagines that there will never be enough**
 - 2. He believes that everyone needs to fend for themselves**
 - 3. He justifies the systematic exploitation of his workers and secures an iron grip on them - even making them his slaves.**

- III. Today's passage from Deuteronomy grows from *that* context - the competing narratives about God's intention for creation and the story of the people of God trying to escape the nightmare of Pharaoh's oppression.**
 - A. We had escaped Egypt**
 - B. We have been on a forty-year desperate desert journey**
 - C. We have *finally* arrived at the edge of the Jordan river and we can see the promised land on the other side.**

- D. And Moses stops us to preach a sermon - 25 chapters of the book of Deuteronomy!
 - 1. 25 chapters lining out for us the instructions from God about how to live together as neighbors.

IV. Moses knows that this is a *teachable* moment:

- A. Our long - long desert wandering is nearly over
- B. Our coming into the land of promise looms near
- C. We are moving from a place where neighborliness was *necessity* — wilderness wasteland of Desert...
- D. Entering a land where neighborliness is *choice*

V. On the one hand this is a moment of Victory!

- A. We have shaken off Pharaoh's enslavement
- B. We have endured the many hardships of desert wandering and have prevailed
- C. We have learned in a deep and abiding way that God will provide what is needed for our journey (Manna)
- D. We have arrived at the Promised Land! A land flowing with milk and honey . . .
 - 1. Abundant resources - ripe for the taking.

VI. On the other hand this is a dangerous moment!

- A. The promise land comes with *many* temptations
- B. Dangerous ideas of
 - 1. self-sufficiency and
 - 2. self-made affluence, and
 - 3. autonomy and

4. Accumulation of wealth, and power,
5. and imperial dominion,
6. and conspicuous consumption,
7. and segregated living

... These and *many* more dangers await us!!

Moses tries to warn us: "...if you go after these other gods I declare to you . . . You shall surely perish."

VII. Moses reminds us of the kind of society God desires that we establish. For 25 chapters he lines out the hard economic instructions about establishing a social fabric which corresponds with the dreams of God for us.

A. 14 food with hungry

15 cancel debts

17 Excessive wealth accumulation

24 no interest loans no financial exploitation

24 Gleaning

25 Human dignity preserved

B. If we are not Really *really careful*.

1. We will re-create in our promised land the same

† **fear-driven,**

† **anxiety promoting,**

† **life-stifling,**

† **self-promoting**

† **endlessly violent**

† **and nightmare-driven life we left behind in Egypt!**

C. Instead of:

- 1. feeding the hungry / find fault with the poor for being lazy.**
- 2. Canceling the debts of poor/ foreclose on them**
- 3. Restricting excessive accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few / we will allow the most obscene kinds of wealth disparity**
- 4. Instead of rescuing those trapped in human trafficking / avert our eyes, distract our attention and pretend that slavery is a scourge from another age.**
- 5. Instead of no-interest loans / allow the most ridiculous forms of predatory lending - all in the interest of free-market capitalism**
- 6. Instead of making common sense choices to restrict the ownership of weapons capable of killing dozens /. we will assert our individual rights to carry our own weapons to shoot them back.**

D. If we are not very very careful the Promised Land will become one more of Pharoah's Brickyards.

- 1. We will be enslaved again in a world of violence and exploitation and**
- 2. THIS time we will have enslaved ourselves by our choices.**

— Perhaps you will sense a theme across recent sermons —

VIII. We stand at the threshold of a new age of promise

A. But to enter into the life God has made for us

We must choose it!

B. So how do we do that?

IX. We choose God

A. We resist the temptations to be self-directed and self-protective, and self promoting — and we keep God ever before our eyes.

B. Knowing all that God has done we respond in gratitude & obedience.

1. Rather than letting our behavior be totally dominated by our anxiety about whether we are going to get our share, we can choose life by choosing to make our relationship with God and with one another the most important thing.

2. Being rightly related to God and understanding that everything that we are and everything that we have comes from God will help us think about our wealth differently.

3. Seeing that God does not keep track of our many trespasses — we can learn to forgive the trespasses of others.

4. Seeing that God has imposed a radical redistribution of the wealth through the 7-year cycle of Jubilee and debt forgiveness and through the *many* other instructions about not allowing exploitation of the poor and vulnerable - we might begin to think about our own economic system in new ways.

X. We must choose life

- A. We recognize that God has provided enough
- B. We do not have to compete - rather live simply
- C. There is no need for exploitation
- D. We must learn to count others' needs as important as our own.
- E. We allow the needs of our neighbors to shape us.
 1. Instead of seeing them as a problem to be solved . . . We see them as the opportunity God Is providing for *us* to become what God desires us to be.

XI. We stand at a threshold (the edge of the Jordan as it were)

- A. Our past is filled with wise instructions
- B. Our future is bright with promise
- C. We cannot waltz into the future pretending that we do not know what God as warned us about.
- D. And *if* we will choose life — we *will have life* - pressed down shaken together and joyfully spilling over in our laps - a rich and abundant life which is only possible when we align our generosity with God's generosity.

Maybe following as the charge?

My first Encounter with this passage:

- A. Yad Vashem**
- B. Passage powerful on its face**
- C. Even more powerful in its context**