

“Choose Life”

I want to begin this morning by expressing a word about what is called “decision theology.” You have likely heard someone say something like, “*I have decided to believe in Jesus.*” Well that’s a nice thing to decide, I’m sure. This is the position of many evangelicals who want you to know about their decision, and for whom that decision (especially the time and place in which it was made) is very important. In fact for many such believers, if you cannot identify the date, time, location, and circumstances under which you made a decision for Jesus, your faith is suspect and your eternal well-being in jeopardy. I assure you, that is no exaggeration.

There is a major problem with that thinking: Your decision is irrelevant — it is not your call to make. It ignores what God has already done. Harry Wendt, the author of *Crossways* and *The Divine Drama* Bible studies, refers to God as “*The hound of heaven,*” who seeks us out, finds us, and brings us to himself. God is the primary — nay, the *sole!* — actor in the divine drama — the message of salvation. Left on our own, we have no impulse for God, no desire to seek God, no inclination toward God.

Decision theology is arrogant, egotistic, and just plain wrong. It diminishes the concept of sin at work in us. It conceives that humans are the primary agents of their own salvation. It is, finally, atheistic; if I can decide my course of salvation, what do I need God to do?

Yet, once we acknowledge that God in Christ chose me, not I them, there is much to talk about “choosing.”

Today we hear God say to Israel: “***Choose life so that you and your descendants may live . . .***” This comes as part of blessings and curses . . . A study of either the aforementioned *Crossways* or *Divine Drama* will lead you to recognize that much of the Bible is framed in what has been identified as the Suzerainty Covenant Model.

God's relationship with Israel was spelled out in the covenant God handed Moses on Mt. Sinai (then later fleshed out in complete forms in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) — this came in a format from the ancient world of what is called a Suzerainty Covenant, the six chief parts (and you thought that all started with Luther) of which are:

Preamble — in which the ruler identifies himself.

Historical Prologue — a listing of the many graces that ruler has bestowed upon his suzerain (underling).

Stipulations — what the suzerain is expected to do in return (often called “laws”).

Preservation and Re-reading — how the written code is to be kept safe and how often it should receive a public reading so everyone will know and remember what is in it.

Witnesses — who will be called upon should either side act contrary to the terms of the covenant (note how God calls upon heaven and earth as witnesses).

Blessings and Curses — the wonderful things that will follow if the suzerain keeps faithfully the terms set forth and the truly awful things that will befall him if he does not.

We find this format throughout the ancient world, and then in the Old Testament, especially when the prophets come along and proclaim what has been called a “covenant law-suit” — a prophetic utterance that uses this treaty format to call Israel to account for failing to be the people God called them to be.

The format is somewhat hidden and fragmented in the New Testament, but you will find it if you look. For instance, one could argue (Harry Wendt does, and I very much agree with him) that the structure of Paul's Letter to the Romans follows this line. For instance, pay attention to the way by which Paul begins to use the word “*Therefore*” at Chapter 12, which drives you back to chapters one to eleven, where he has neatly

exposed what God has done in Christ. Chapters 1 to 11 form what is called the Historical Prologue (telling you what God has done); chapter 12 begins the stipulations (setting forth what we are to do).

Such covenants are sometimes referred to also as “covenants of human obligation” which must be distinguished from “covenants of divine commitment.”

When God told Abram that he would have descendants as countless as the stars in the heavens (which lesson we read about four weeks ago), that was a covenant of divine commitment. In effect, God was saying, *“Nothing you do or don’t do will have any effect on this. I’m just gonna do it!”*

When God gave Moses the Torah, that was a covenant of human obligation. In effect, God was saying, *“This depends almost entirely on your response and obedience.”*

That raises a question for us: *“Which kind of covenant do we live under (or through, or with)? Divine Commitment? Or Human Obligation?”*

In typical professorial response, I will say, *“Yes.”* On the one hand, God has done everything necessary for our salvation — everything: in the death and resurrection of Christ, we have all that we need. Beyond that, God has provided for us in many ways: physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually, “you-name-it-ally.” On the other hand, God invites our response. This is not *“choose what I have given you”* (you don’t choose a gift, you receive it), but it is a recognition that, when you come to value what a great gift it is, you will somehow make appropriate use of it.

So it is that we come to a blessings and curses section of the Book of Deuteronomy in which we are given the invitation to choose life. What does it mean to “choose life”? Consider the opposite — choose death! Who would do that? Yet we do over and over choose the path toward death, rather than the path to life.

We choose life when we choose obey the law of Christ. Jesus said:

“Love one another as I have loved you.” We do not love as we have been loved. We choose death. Hatred, prejudice, resentments, grudges, calculations, revenge, retribution, harbor in our hearts. We are fed by hurts, mistrust, anger, lust. We cannot love as fully as Christ loved, but choose life and we move toward that unselfish, uncalculating, other-directed love.

We choose life when we serve those in need. ***“The measure you give is the measure you get in return,”*** Jesus teaches us. ***“Give, and it shall be given unto you.”*** We know there is great reward in giving — not just from our excess, but sacrificially. We see Christ give all on the cross — we know this is love, and we are called to such giving. We do not give as we have been given to. Out of fear, out of greed, out of indifference, we hold back. We think *“Somebody might get something they don’t deserve.”* Or, *“I may be deprived of something I really want.”*

We choose life when we defend the most vulnerable among us. ***“In the Kingdom of God, nobodies are somebodies, and somebodies are called upon to become nobodies so that they may be somebodies in the Kingdom of God.”*** If you saw a six-foot man beating on a six-year-old child, you would do something about it, wouldn’t you? What would you do? Pray for conversion of this man’s heart? Hope really, really hard that the situation would become better? Step in to prevent any further beating? Call a cop to put a stop to it?

We know that children all over the world, and in our neighborhoods, face such abuse (and worse). Women are abused, degraded, humiliated, accosted. Whole people groups are attacked and killed because they belong to a different people group (if you watched the Ken Burns series, “The U.S. and the Holocaust” on PBS this past fortnight, you saw again how horrendous that can get).

We know this goes on, but we don’t see it, so we don’t do something about it. Or worse, we do see it but we feel paralyzed about the circumstances: *“It’s too far away.”* *“That’s their culture, you’re not going to change it.”* Or worse yet, we see it and it simply doesn’t bother

us because we won't let it get to us; we enure ourselves to that kind of ugliness.

We do not care as deeply as we have been cared for. Sometimes we need to go out of our way to care. Caring is not always convenient.

We do not choose life when we blind ourselves to evil. We can ignore evil (some of us are quite good at it). Don't read the news or watch TV or listen to the radio. Keep yourself uninformed; make sure you pay attention only to those who share your preconceptions. Give in to the idea: *"What can one person do?"* [Then think of Rosa Parks or Mother Theresa]. We do not make use of the power and authority given to us. Healing, strengthening, forgiving, exorcising. We are endowed with the Spirit of the living God!!

We do not choose life when we hold on to things. We often invest things with deeper meaning. *"I love this quilt — it was a gift from my deceased mother."* Throw it away? Why would I? Why should I? If it becomes your security, not Christ, it needs to go.

We do not cling to Christ as He has taken hold of us. ***"I have called you by name. You are mine."*** (Is. 43:9) We often allow other things to gain priority: job, family, home, status, money. Jesus taught us, ***"Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me."***

I need to insert here a quick word on the word "hate" in this Gospel reading: The Greek word is $\mu\iota\sigma\epsilon\omega$ (miseo), and it is not talking about the emotional response we should have toward our families. A better translation (or paraphrase) here would be something like "reject," or "disown" or "renounce."

We do not choose life when we mismanage our stewardship of God's gifts. There is no mismanagement more severe than misplaced priorities. Nothing inhibits good stewardship like a lack of trust. We do not trust as we have been entrusted with bounty and talents.

“... loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you . . .”

Loving God ***“with all your heart, soul, mind, strength . . .”*** Of course, you know the corollary to that: “your neighbor as yourself,” with all you are, have, and hope to be.

Obeying. The sad fact is the first hearers of this message in Deuteronomy did not live up to this plea. But God did not give up on them — He sent them to 40 years of wandering, a punishment that came to be viewed as a great outpouring of grace. He kept sending them prophets to turn them back to His open arms. He sent them into exile, but always with the promise of restoration, and restore them He did. We often have to learn the painful lessons of disobedience, but with God there is always forgiveness.

Which is why the encouragement is there: Holding fast to Him. God always has kept His end of the covenant relationship. Jesus promised: ***“I will never leave you or forsake you . . . I will be with you to the close of the age.”*** That’s what we hold fast: those promises and so many others.

Jesus says: ***“... none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”*** *“Really? It’s been nice knowing you, Jesus. Call me when you’ve changed your mind about that.”* It’s a hard word . . . even harder to do . . . does He mean it? We want to temper it, but we cannot. Pastor Brian Stoffregen comes close to giving us the help we need: *“On one hand, Jesus makes it very difficult to be his disciple. It will cost us everything and we need to know the cost before ‘jumping in.’ On the other hand, Jesus may be making it impossible to be his disciple on our own abilities? When we confess, ‘I can’t,’ then we are open for God’s ‘I can.’”*

We are left with this: If we choose — not to believe in God, but to take that to the next level and to live out that faith — we will face some very hard choices indeed — choose life anyhow. And join Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof to rejoice: ***“L’chaim!” “To life!”*** Amen.