

To whom will you be faithful? To whom do you show your allegiance? Will your choice lead to life or death?

In Deuteronomy we read about how Moses led the people to the plains of Moab on the border of Canaan. This is as close as Moses will ever get to the Promised Land...and here he lays out his final instructions to the people. – captured in the book of Deuteronomy.

He first summarizes the events between the encounter with God at Sinai and the encampment in Moab. He reminds the people about the Ten Commandments... especially the first Commandment.

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Moses is instructed by God to declare to the people God's greatest commandment. He proclaims: Shema! Y'Israel. Adonai Elohenu Adoni achad. ⁴Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Later, in the Gospels, Jesus Christ expands it. In Matthew 22:37-40 He says, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

To our questions: Whom to whom shall we give our allegiance, Scripture and story reminds us to “Love the LORD our God”

^{TNK} Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Moses says, “See, today I am setting before you a choice - life and prosperity, or death and adversity.

For I command you today,
to love the LORD your God,
to walk in his ways,
and to keep his commandments, his laws, and his rules, so that you may thrive and increase,
and that the LORD your God
may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

But if your heart turns away and you give no heed,
and are lured into the worship and service of other gods, I declare to you today
that you will certainly perish;
you will not long endure
on the soil that you are crossing the Jordan
to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death,
blessing and curse. Choose life -- if you and your offspring would live -- by loving the LORD
your God, heeding his commands, and holding fast to him.

For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the LORD swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them.”

Lots of stuff there – and its all about choice. Choosing life and choosing death – but I have to say choice is an action – not just a word spoken. We can all say “I choose life” – because we all do – but do we actually know what that means?

Let’s look at what Moses says choosing life looks like: Choosing life means to:

To love the LORD your God,
to walk in his ways,
and to keep his commandments, his laws, and his rules.

Three verbs. Love, Walk and Keep/Observe.

These three aren’t separate, but rather three different ways to express the same thing. Three action words to express being in a committed relationship with God.

Jesus teaches that observing the law doesn’t result in getting us into God’s good graces. Instead, it is because we love God that we desire to follow God’s law. We express our love for God by walking in God’s paths and observing, putting into practice, keeping his directions for how to live.

Now, what about choosing death – I don’t think that we ever really choose death. I don’t think that most of us – given the choice, will say “I choose death!” However, by not choosing to love, walk and keep God’s commandments we are choosing death.

Dennis Bratcher, a Methodist Pastor in Oklahoma writes that this choice isn’t an emotional choice.

“We often associate heart with love and emotion, and we often contrast passion “from the heart” with reason and rationality. However, in Hebrew, and especially in Deuteronomy, the heart is the center of our rationality. And the bowels are the place of passion and emotion. Thus to “love the Lord with all your heart” means to rationally decide to love God. If we want to be all gushy about loving God, we say, “love the Lord with all your guts.”¹

In verses 17 and 18 when we read “if your heart turns away” it means that we are making a deliberate decision to turn from God and thus to choose death.

When we do not choose for God then we cannot live in a way that is pleasing to God – and it will lead to destruction.

The people are called to remember their failures, to look forward to the opportunity to move beyond them and learn from them. Will they be governed by the failures of the past or will they move into a new and unknown future defined by God and his promise?

¹ Bratcher, D. (2019, October 29). *Sixth Sunday after epiphany*. Ae6 Commentary, Deut 30:15-20, Epiphany 6 OT. Retrieved November 20, 2021, from <http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearA/Aepiphany6ot.html>.

Can we get this passage to apply to our lives? Yes, I think so. First, through Jesus we know that a committed relationship with God will result in kindness, truth, humility and wholeness coming through our pores out to the world.

Deliberately choosing God as LORD of our lives – and Christ as KING will improve the quality of our relationships and thus our lives. Through Jesus we know that God is with us WHEREVER we are – and whatever the state of our land, house, freedom, family, or money situation.

If we acknowledge God is LORD, then we give God control of all things in our life – our family, our safety, our gratitude, our hope. When we acknowledge Christ as king then we live as Christ lived: with love for God AND for our neighbor, humbly and honestly and graciously towards others AND to ourselves.

A relationship with God can NEVER one-sided. When I look at the promises in our Bible, I can't help but see that they all demand something of us in return. It is too shallow a faith to say accepting Jesus as my LORD and saviour is enough. NO. God has made you a blessing so that you can be a blessing. God has given life so that we can share life with others. Saying yes to the blessing means that you actually have to be one.

In all of God's promises there is a reciprocal action on our part. A YES.

In Revelation we hear some beautiful promises – I especially love it when Christ says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end, the first and the last...to those who are thirsty (that's your part – be thirsty) I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life...Amen.

When we say, “Amen” we join our prayers with those who have gone before us to our foremothers and forefathers in faith – to welcome into our midst the Kingdom of God.

So I ask you today, whom today will you serve? Will you choose death or life? I pray that you will come to know Christ, to listen to, walk with and serve Christ with your whole being. Shema. Hear, oh Menno. Yahweh is God, Yahweh alone.

Lighting the darkness:

We read, from Revelation 21:

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said,

“See, I am making all things new.”

Also he said,

“Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶ Then he said to me,

“It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Our God is the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the dawn and setting sun. Let us bask in the light and presence of God. (Light 1st Candle)

We will light a candle today – offering to God our disappointments of this last year. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be. (Light 2nd Candle)

We will light a candle today – offering to God our losses of this last year:

Be it a loss of a job,

The loss of a hope, or dream

The loss of health or strength

The loss of a relationship

The loss of a beloved pet

(Light 3rd Candle)

We will light a candle today – offering to God the spirit and soul of our beloved sisters and brothers in Christ who have died this year. We light a candle for these now – and for all others whom we know and love and name in our hearts.

Let your light of peace enfold us and those dear to us, and all those who have no peace.

(Light large 4th Candle)

We will light a candle for the losses and fears we hold in our hearts and that have not been named. Let these fears and losses that we hold in our hearts be brought to the light of your rest and healing.

(Light 5th Candle)

Your light heralds a new dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys and new possibilities. Together we proclaim our hope and belief that God is our light and salvation, so we have nothing to fear.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not, will not, and cannot overcome it.

(Light 6th Candle)²

² Adapted from Voices Together # 986. First published in The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, N. Z. and P. (Ed.). (1988). In *A New Zealand Prayer Book*.

Whom will you serve?

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