

## **Choose Life**

### **A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**

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**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

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Imagine you were drawn up out of the water – an infant, literally lifted from the Nile, saved from genocide, raised by Pharaoh’s daughter, nursed by your birth mother, and protected by your clever older sister. As an adult, awoken to the injustice and oppression faced by your native people, you kill one of Pharaoh’s henchmen, forcing you to become a fugitive. In a foreign land, you find the kindness of a stranger, who will employ you, and later become your father-in-law. His daughter, now your wife, who is just as smart and brave and timely as your sister, will save your life with her quick thinking. Many years later, well past the time you are eligible for Social Security, you’ll notice a burning bush that isn’t consumed by flames, and you’ll meet the one we know as YHWH, and you’ll stand on holy ground. And that’s just the beginning.

You’ll go back to the land you fled, and through you, God will free your people. With the help of your brother’s eloquent tongue, and your sister’s prophetic ways, you’ll defy, enrage, and eventually topple Pharaoh and his army. You’ll lead a rag-tag band of believers, a million or so women, men, and children, from the flat deltas of Egypt, to the heights of Mt. Sinai, eluding soldiers, and even marching through parted seas. High on the mountain, you’ll receive God’s law, and share it with your people. And in your humanness, and in theirs too, together, you’ll awkwardly maneuver the beginnings of covenant living, with all of its ups and downs. There will be forty years of wandering, and manna, and discernment, and life.

And then, one day, you’ll crest a mountaintop, the past behind you, the future in front of you, and this moment of present will be your last. The Israel that was, the one that was so confused, the one that left Egypt in a hurry, is now about to enter a new land: its own land; its own future; its own identity. But you can’t go with them. You’ve helped to give them freedom from an oppressive ruler. You’ve helped to give them the law. You’ve helped to give them an understanding of God. And now, you are about to give them one last thing: their independence as a people, living in a new land of promise.

Imagine you are Moses. And you have one last farewell speech. What do you say?

Choose life!

And what is life? Life is living, being, acting as if God is our center. Life is resolving to believe that God is our source of every imaginable kind of security.

Life is the company of a mama who engineers a papyrus basket into a makeshift ark, and a sister who's got your back, and a brother who supports you, and a spouse who thinks about your wellbeing as much as she does her own. Life is sweet flaky manna in the wilderness, enough to fill you up, but not so much that you need to worry about Tupperware. Life is salvation, serendipitous space offered at the edge of a crowded peninsula flanked by an army and a raging sea. Life is clarity, made manifest in a covenant tradition that cultivates the idea of neighbor. Life is skiing in the wake of fire by night and cloud by day that tells you this world is God's, no matter how many Pharaohs try to tell you otherwise. Life is the consistency of God, even when our feelings, and our actions, and our faith are inconsistent.

The story of Moses is the story of Israel, and it's also the story of each one of us.

Each of our lives has been shaped by a community of support. Think about who has drawn you out of water.

Each of our lives has been marked by times of steadfast faith AND moments of doubt or second-guessing. When have you escaped the anxieties and pressures of Pharaoh, only to trade them for the uncertainty of a new wilderness?

Each of our lives are shaped by covenant, a kind of responsibility and accountability to our neighbors. When have you loved, supported, and advocated for your community of neighbors? And when have you been overwhelmed by the long, hard, often underappreciated adherence to covenant, only to say, "No thanks, not today?"

Each of our lives are gifted, blessed, endowed with remarkable abilities and talents. When have you chosen to believe the gifts that God affirms in you, can be used to empower, embolden, and elevate the world around you? When have you believed that your gifts can help free others to live in God? And when have you doubted such gifts? When has a broken past, or a nervous stammer, or just a feeling of being too ordinary, prevented you from hearing God's call?

Each of our lives has a future, an invitation to a new land of promise. When have you decided to push those skis downhill, confident that God's got you? When have you let the weight, or the PTSD of Pharaoh's incessant "NO!" keep you perched in a stymied present?

I think what Moses is telling the earliest Israelites, and what he's telling me and you, too, is that he's been there with us. He knows what it's like to be a human being. And he says, if you're gonna live, really live, that means you've got to choose life. You've got to be obedient to God, not to the things that pose as gods. You've got to love one another with the spirit of the God who loves us all. You've got to be more than an observer of God's call, you've got to be one who responds to God's call. You've got to be more than just awake to the needs of your neighbors, you've got to be one that responds to the needs of your neighbors. You've got to be a people that does more than just memorize and regurgitate God's laws and ways, you've got to be a people that love, apply, and evolve in God's ways.

Moses isn't offering an ultimatum. He's not saying choose life or else. I think he's saying, there's an abundance in your future, but that future is only going to remain abundant – that is full of enough-ness, love, value, dignity, worth, equality, justice, mercy, grace, etc – it's only gonna stay that way, if it's steeped in a life of covenant living. The alternative is back in Egypt, where the Pharaohs of this world may offer predictability, but never manna.

I also realize that Deuteronomy is a text steeped in the idea of retributive justice – do good, get good; do bad, get bad. That's a pretty vicious cycle. And when we think in such precise terms, we often eliminate the magnitude, the imagination, and the limitless possibilities of God's grace. There were days, a lot of days, when Moses didn't choose life. I don't recall any verses where God sent Moses an eviction notice, or a cease and desist order, or an end-of-year deadline. I seem to recall a merciful God, one who waits with patience, one who pursues with love,

one who forgives to the thousandth generation. I seem to recall a God who stuck with a people, through forty years of indecisiveness (an eternity in those days!), and still invited them into a land of promise. Choosing life is not an ultimatum from God. Choosing life is standing invitation.

Let me say a final word about today's passage. We stand on a mountaintop, looking into a valley of promise, considering an invitation to live as God's people amidst God's lands. The irony is not lost on me that our story tells us of a God who decides one nation should have the right to occupy the lands of another nation. And the only crime of the occupied people, appears to be that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is additional irony, that we, the people of this congregation, live on lands that were occupied, claimed by manifest destiny, and taken from indigenous peoples, again, for the innocuous offense of living in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is further still irony, that we live in a time where borders are being closed to repel the advances of modern sojourners fleeing modern pharaohs. And within our own borders, within our own zip codes, coffee houses, restaurants, microbreweries, townhouses, fancy offices – economic boom, gentrification, reclamation – poses as the new promised land, relocating modern-day Canaanites for the offenses of poverty, skin color, or other nasty isms caused by the very covenant we falsely claim to keep.

If we are going to choose life, that is, if we are going to be a people covenanted to God and neighbor, our lives cannot continue to be lives defined by the things, the people, and the lands we occupy. Ours must be lives, defined by the things, the people, and the places that are experienced AND shared together in God's presence. In other words, the land of promise can have no borders, can have no barriers, can have no limitations, if it is indeed one that reflects the God who offers it.

Friends, there is manna to be had. There is jubilee to be experienced. There is giftedness aplenty to be shared. There is God among us, each of us, if only, we choose life.

May it be so! And may it be soon! Amen.