

Several years ago, we engaged this morning's text from Deuteronomy, and I found a few words from a past sermon that set the scene well. I share them with you again today:

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 only 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 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. It's the story of choosing life.

I want to spend the remainder of my time this morning talking about the nuances of "choosing life." What does it mean to be lively? Also, what does it not mean? Let's start with the affirmative.

Three words to remember. Curiosity. Discomfort. Empathy.

Curiosity. When we choose life, we choose to be curious rather than content. Long before all of his wandering and rabbleroxing, Moses had a pretty good setup. He worked for his father-in-law. He had a family. His past was nice and compartmentalized, both mentally and geographically. He could have retired with ease. He could have just focused in on his favorite podcast while he was tending sheep, and tuned out his surroundings. But he is captivated by a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. His desire for discovery leads him into a serendipitous and holy experience.

What are we curious about Sardis? Each week, we recall the imaginative and transformative possibilities of God manifested in the stories of our past. Are we open, observant, eager, even, to discover those same possibilities in our own lives?

Discomfort. When we choose life, we choose, at least sometimes, to brave the risk of discomfort, or the upsetting of the status quo, in order to shake us from the abuses and limitations of predictable comfort.

There's a Pharaoh, a real Leroy Brown-type; badder than Ole King Kong and meaner than a junkyard dog. What if one day, God told you that you had every needed capacity and resource to liberate your people from Pharaoh. All you have to do is be eloquent, be confident, be brave, and be bold. "If you just find your voice, and trust me, I'll help you," God says, "You can un-bully that bully!"

Everyone of us can live in Iambic Pentameter. That's fun! It flows. But how many of us are willing to try the things that make us stammer, that get us flustered, that bring out our vulnerabilities? When we choose life, we trust in a God that uses every part of us. To choose life is to proclaim that each of us, in our own way, have the capacity and potential to liberate our communities from destructive behaviors and systems.

Empathy. When we choose life, we choose to be empathetic rather than selfish. Exodus tells us the story of a people who were subjugated, marginalized, and ultimately enslaved. And even after being liberated, this people endured hunger, homelessness, and drought. They also knew what it was to be strangers in a strange land.

Moses tells Israel that real living is rooted in welcome and hospitality. Israel cannot be truly liberated from the destructive tendencies of Pharaoh if its people simply switch places in a destructive scheme. Israel must love and care for its neighbors. And Israel must broaden its definition of neighbor to include stranger.

Are we willing, Sardis, to use our curiosity, and an openness for embracing discomfort, to find new ways of loving neighbor? Are we interested in liberating BOTH ourselves and others from Pharaoh's grasp?

Moses invites Joshua's generation, and ours as well, to choose life. We must be present. We must be curious. We must be empathetic. Sometimes we're even asked to be uncomfortable. But it's life, and life abundant.

I mentioned nuance. The Deuteronomistic editors had an agenda. I suppose we all do. They desired a very formal, very structured set of procedures to embody covenant living. The structure ensured the Temple economy would fire on all cylinders.

I honestly don't believe these editors were limited to, or even preferred a transactional style of thinking, but transactional ideas definitely served their purposes. If everyone follows the manual, it's a whole lot easier to herd all the cats. And it's a whole lot easier to run the Temple.

The language in this text is less directional and more concrete – choose life or choose death. Much like Psalm One, the reader is left with two polarities: righteous or wicked, prosperous or floundering, faithful or unfaithful.

Choosing life is not choosing, I repeat, is NOT choosing to walk a tightrope laced with anxiety and fear. Choosing life is seeking out a world of curiosity, and empathy, and compassion, while also embracing the idea that God offers each one of us a wide berth to get there. It's knowing that there is always a future beyond our alienation, beyond our wilderness, beyond our rebellion, beyond our doubt, beyond our grumpiness.

So...Sardis. What if, just for this morning, instead of imagining that we were looking at the Joshua generation's future, we imagined we were looking at our own? We've wandered, not quite 40 years, closer to 35.

And we find ourselves on a ridgeline. We look out and see a new space filled with new possibilities: Church in the post-Covid world. And we can look behind us, and see all the moments that got us to this point: the times when we marched in step with one another, or kind of in step, or completely out of step. Our minds are flooded with the memories of saints whose curiosity, empathy, and willingness to engage discomfort have gotten us to this very place.

And the question for us is very simple: Where have we experienced life, then and now? And how might we choose life in the future?

May God give us ears to listen, eyes to see, hearts to love, and limbs that carry us boldly into a lively future! Amen.