

“Choose Life!”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday February 16, 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

The occasion for these words is Moses’ farewell address to the people.

The people are heading towards the promised land, and Moses is going to die.

The people are going forward into God’s future, and Moses knows he isn’t going with them.

The Lord has told him that he is going to die.

What do you tell the people you love when you know that you are sending them forward into the future and you are not going with them?

In these moments we want to speak directly from our hearts, we want to say what is of first and most importance, the words that you want them to hold on to.

And Moses tells them: *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.*

17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18 I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.”

For a few minutes this morning I want to explore first what this meant for the people of Israel, and then consider if these words still apply to us.

At a very basic level these words apply to the covenant of God with Israel.

God was giving them the promised land, and their part was to keep the commands of God.

God had chosen them to be a light to the nations, God had brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery and delivered them from their enemies, God was giving them a good land, and God showed them how to live.

The ten commandments, and the decrees of the Lord were about how to live rightly related to God, to one another, and the world.

On a very surface level it could be said that following God's ways, God's commands and ordinances lead us to eternal life.

Choose God's way that leads to eternal life, any other way is death.

But as I have been thinking more about this passage it seems to me that it is saying much more both to the people of Israel and to us.

We are invited, in this passage, to choose life – to choose the things that make for abundant, full, rich, shalom filled lives.

St. Augustine, a great thinker in the early church, described sin as “disordered loves.”

If I asked you what are the 10 commandments- what do you think of first? – do not kill, do not steal, do not covet, do not bear false witness.

But what is the first commandment?

² ***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.***

³ ***“You shall have no other gods before^[a] me.***

It sounds very much like this passage:

¹⁷ *But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.”*

I think Moses is right.

When we put ultimate value on anything other than God it will destroy us.

Sometimes it's easier to see the idols other people worship more clearly than we see our own.

We see people putting all their energy, all their passion into their businesses or work, and though they might not see it, or admit it they are putting ultimate value on it.

Some do it for the money, some for the success, some for the power, some for the status.

We see some folks who won't retire, their significance, their value, their personhood is tied up in their work, or position.

Work is good, status is good, money is good, success and productivity are all good, but when they have the wrong place in our sense of who we are, when we have a disordered love, it is an idol that will destroy us.

For some it's not their work that is their idol it is their relationships.

Our kids, our spouse, our friends, being popular, being accepted, being valued, being a success as a parent, having the approval of others, can be an idol.

There are the parents who can't bear to see their kids move away, or feel a failure if their kids fail.

We see those who spend their lives looking for the approval or acceptance of parents, or friends, or others.

Relationships are good, they are important, having friends, having good relationships is healthy and a blessing, but when our loves are disordered, and any of these relationships are given ultimate value in our lives, they too will destroy us.

Our spouse may be the most wonderful person in the world- but he/she is not going to save, redeem, fulfill or complete you- only God is going to do that.

God is the only one who knows us completely, who loves us unconditionally, who is our Creator and so is able to save, redeem, and fulfill us.

I built my life around... my family, my kids, my work, my spouse, making a name for myself, making them happy, being the best in my field, winning the trophy, being published, being famous, being... and then the kids move away, or retirement comes, or your spouse leaves, or someone else is more famous, or my record is broken, or an injury crushes the dream; our idols will always break our hearts.

Part of a commencement address by David Foster Wallace, not a Christian: *“Because here’s something else that’s weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such*

thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.”

Worship God because “pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.”

Choose life.

On the cross of Jesus we see the one who created us, who knows us and we see the full extent of God's love that gives our lives meaning and purpose, and tells us that we are valued.

In giving the Father, Son and Holy Spirit the ultimate place, the first place in our lives, everything else falls into place.

Then our kids are free to be just our kids, our spouse is free to be our spouse, our work is just our work, what others think is just that, success, failure, health, injury, come and go but we are secure in the love of Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

Amen