

Is it Either/Or?  
Deuteronomy 30.15-20  
Sunday, September 4, 2016  
Pentecost +16C  
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Moses has gone as far as he can go. He has faced God already for the choices he has made, and his time of leadership is coming to a close. He has served the people of Israel and brought them from slavery to wandering to promise. And now they stand together at the boundary line<sup>1</sup> between what has been and what will be. They haven't yet crossed into the next story, but they know it's there waiting for them—a land promised and ready to be claimed. Moses speaks to the family gathered around him—the friends, brothers, sisters with whom he has traveled for so long—and he offers a final invitation to them: choose life and not death.

That is the steady invitation of the boundary line in our lives, too. Boundary lines are those places in our lives where the seasons rub up against one another, and we know we are shifting from one into the next. Adolescence into independence. Young adulthood moving into career and marriage. Considering family and the responsibility of children. Middle adulthood stepping further away from youth and toward caring for teens and young adults or aging parents (often both), while simultaneously more fully entrenched in career. Older adulthood welcoming retirement and its freedom with a new reality of a third season of adult life. The boundary lines in life are a time of choice. We ask ourselves, "What is this going to be? Who am I going to become? What will I do with this life I have been given?" Or maybe we ask, "How do I get out of here? How do I undo what I have done? Is it too late to start over?"

Sometimes at the boundary line we pivot. Everything changes, we do start over, we make different plans, we throw it all away or we clean it all up, we rearrange and reprioritize. We sense the opportunity to do things differently and participate mindfully in writing the story of our lives. And when we come to these places in life where everything seems to have a weight about it—every choice and next step matters so much—it can feel threatening to hear Moses' words to choose rightly. Choose life or death, choose blessing or cursing. We already feel the pressure. We don't need the added weight of getting it dangerously wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *Interpretation: Deuteronomy*, p. 214 "boundary line"

Moses isn't speaking from a superior seat of judgment. He speaks as one who has chosen poorly before; he has overstepped his own role as servant leader of Israel and attempted to stand as a god-like leader before them, striking rock and making water flow without the blessing and instruction of the one, true God or credit given to the Source of all things. He knows that being in loving relationship with God requires living in a certain way, and he hasn't always gotten that right. He wants the people before him to choose well and choose wisely. Even so, we feel the weight and threat of making the wrong move. But Moses' words should not be heard from a place of fear.

Tyler Mayfield speaks to the "selection between two options: life and death. The Common English Bible translation stays close to the Hebrew wording: 'life and what's good versus death and what's wrong.'"<sup>2</sup> If you, like me, already battle your perfectionist tendencies and fear the consequences of misstep, then Moses' words can be paralyzing. Our challenge this morning is to hear them as a flowing, almost circular, looping invitation that spans time from one boundary line to the next.

Consider a time in your life when you have known a transition was before you—aging, stuck in mundane routine, abrupt life change, expected or unexpected—and consider how you have responded to the options of moving forward. Patrick Miller writes, "The most fundamental choice of life lies before those who have come to this boundary line."<sup>3</sup> However, this fundamental choice mustn't be daunting, threatening, or overwhelming. If we are afraid of choosing wrong, we aren't moving in God's rhythm. God doesn't prompt us to be afraid. God invites us to abundant life. And so this choosing blessing and goodness is about our holy participation in the life of God.

Last Monday, Rob Bell began a series on his weekly podcast about the Wisdom tradition. [You've only missed the first episode, if you're interested in catching up; the second will be available tomorrow.<sup>4</sup>] And in the first episode he talks about having a holy, sacred reverence for life, saying, "You have all this power to create your life. And in the Wisdom tradition, something powerful happens when you connect with this holy, sacred reverence for your very existence."

You have all this power to create your life. Consider, then, Moses' invitation as a reminder that life is sacred. And life is filled with daily, hourly, minute-to-minute opportunities to spark with the Divine. We are continually invited to participate in life—

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1953](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1953)

<sup>3</sup> Miller, p. 214

<sup>4</sup> The RobCast, available on iTunes

in naming what's good, in helping to create more of what's good, in giving ourselves to God's good. Who chooses death? Who stands at life's boundary lines and decides, "I need more cursing in my life. I need more fear, more anxiety, less certainty, less hope." There's a fallacy to this lesson Moses is teaching, and he knows it. We hear a similar but different invitation from Jesus to his disciples as he urges them to stay awake. Don't sleepwalk through this. Don't miss what's before you. Wake up and see the life before you. See God in each step and in each other. Wake up to your life and participate in it. Otherwise, you have chosen death before you've even died.

As we read Deuteronomy 30, we are given a narrative context of Moses before the people of Israel at the boundary of the Promised Land. In this moment they are invited to love God, to walk in God's ways, to keep God's commandments, statutes, judgments. A few verses later the invitation broadens to: love God, hear God's voice, cling to God. They are invited to live in an active, loving way.

In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Patrick Miller notes, "The land given must also be a land taken; the life offered must also be a life lived out. And there is only one way to do that, a way that has now been spelled out in detail in the instruction of the Lord. It has to do with the manner of Israel's worship, purity of life, justice and fairness toward the weak and the poor and the slave, honor of parents, respect of neighbors, administration of justice, leadership of the people...and many other things."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the choice is actively living in the particular and peculiar ways of God.

Taking a step back from the story itself, current scholarship suggests this story was written at the time of the Babylonian exile. Where land has been lost, Israel divided, and a remnant is now wandering in a foreign land again. It would seem they chose death, right? They didn't heed Moses' words at all. Surely the lesson of exile is a choice of cursing. And yet, the story laid before an exiled Israel is instead the story of promise and invitation. The story of boundary line. The story of Moses offering a people the chance to wake up to their lives and choose to participate in the story of God. Is this choice really either/or? No, it's again and again. We choose again. We choose God's voice, we choose God's path, we choose God's love again and again. No matter how lost we get or stuck we feel, no matter how badly we have neglected our lives and each other, the invitation keeps rolling toward us. It is a wave of gracious invitation that flows toward us repeatedly, even now.

And so we are people who gather and remember. We are people who confess our missteps and wake each other up. We are people who sing praise and offer prayer. We

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, p. 214

are people who forget tomorrow what we knew so fully today. We are people who stand at the boundary lines of our lives, as individuals and as a collective, and we choose again what draws us more fully onto the Way of God's love. Let's hold these things before us as we prepare to meet at the Table.

Amen.