

“Choose Life”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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The scene painted in Deuteronomy chapter 30 is a homecoming scene of sorts. For Moses, it will be his last. For his family and his community, it will be a homecoming remembered for many generations.

The aging Moses, sensing his time on earth is waning, calls for everyone in the family and community to a homecoming powwow. No one knows what important announcement Moses is going to make. They just sense something of huge significance is in the air, and every family is represented at the gathering. It is a standing-room-only crowd.

In what may be his finest hour, Moses draws on the wisdom of his whole life and issues a challenge to his community. He reminds them that God sets before us each and every day life and death. And then, Moses implores them to CHOOSE LIFE! He implores them to explore every possible angle on any given situation and then to make the decision that is most life-affirming! “Choose life,” he says, “choose life!”

For Moses, choosing life had to do with aligning oneself with God’s creative work, partnering with God in mending the brokenness of the world, teaming up with God to accomplish God’s purposes of peace and justice. So, when it comes to the decisions we make as individuals, as faith communities, and even as nations; the question is always whether our decision places us in line with God’s intentions or in opposition to what God has in mind.

And once that decision has been made, once the alignment of God's vision for peace and our readiness to roll up ourselves for the work of peace-making, once that connection has been established, then miracles happen! Then doors open that had been closed for centuries. Then, wounds heal, wounds that had festered for decades. Then, wild flowers spring up where only weeds had grown before.

We see in the world today what appears to be a huge shortage of miracles. Why is this? Could it be because persons and communities and even nations have got things backwards, are asking God to come and be on my side, side with us, take up our cause? When, in the wisdom of Moses, to choose life is to move in the opposite direction; that is, to choose life is to align our energies with God's purpose, **for us to choose to be on God's side!**

As we read through Scripture, we see that God is always about the work of mending. To choose life is to do this work of mending. One of my childhood memories is that whenever there was any kind of a social function, the grandmothers in the community would show up with their mending baskets. And inside those baskets there would be wool socks awaiting the darning needle. There would be work shirts missing buttons. There would be garments with seams needing to be re-stitched. There would be an impressive collection of little hooks and thimbles and scissors and pins and cushions and zippers and other paraphernalia unbeknownst to a boy's understanding. But the one thing that was not misunderstood by any of us children was the importance of this mending work. And it was the grandmothers who did it.

Today, I'd like to invite the church to reclaim this nearly lost art. I would like us to think of ourselves as menders again, as menders of the earth, as menders of relationships, as menders and not just the grandmothers among us, all of us!

Our work is to keep an eye out for what is torn and then to bring our personal and our collective resources to bear on its mending.

I think of being a mender of the earth. Many of you here are far more sophisticated than I when it comes to this topic and we all have much to learn. I was thinking of the way the check-out person asks me whether I want a bag of paper or plastic, as if there were just the two choices. What if I were to have shown up with my own fabric tote bag? If I, alone, were to do that, the clerk would smile at me, maybe pat me on the shoulder, and send me on my way. But if TWO customers presented a fabric tote bag as an alternative to paper and plastic, they might think there was something fishy going on. And if FIFTY people showed up with their canvas tote bags for toting groceries back home, they'd think it was a movement of some kind. And they'd be right! It would be the Moses Choose Life movement. And in a tiny way, we'd be doing the mending and not the tearing. There are far more sophisticated ways to mend God's earth. I mention this one only as a way of priming the pump! I was pleased when I registered at the UCC General Synod in the Hartford Civic Center to receive all my materials in this fabric tote bag!

I think of us being menders of relationships. Like those old wool athletic socks we used to wear, relationships have a way of unraveling and wearing thin. To choose life is to be open to the possibility of mending. In Robert Frost's poem, *Mending Walls*, two land owners pick a day in the springtime to walk the stone walls that serve as property lines. The intent is to mend the fences. But it becomes clear they each have a very different view of what it means to mend. The one is a literalist, thinks only of mounting stone upon stone. The other takes things more symbolically, likes to think there could be some mending of the friendship just by walking a ways together. For me, the poem suggests how difficult it can be, this task of mending relationships.

Occasionally, one of those grandmothers with a mending basket would conclude that the garment was simply beyond repair, and she'd set that garment aside and invest her talent where it might bear fruit. That, too, is a way of choosing life. Not every relationship is salvageable. When Moses implored his flock to choose life, he was asking them to be open to the possibility of the mending of torn relationships. He asks nothing less of churches.

What does it mean for anyone here to choose life on any given day? I'd like to end now with a very simple observation I made yesterday while crafting this sermon. One of our members had noticed a proliferation of weeds in a certain area of the church property. He arrived with tools and gloves and a readiness to beautify God's grounds. He was choosing life! Before long, he had quite a pile of cuttings and weeds and branches. Meanwhile, another man, hauling a load of tree branches in a trailer behind his pickup truck, sensed his load shifting, and pulled over on High Street to make an adjustment. (It's amazing what I can hear through my office window!) While repositioning the tree limbs, he noticed the first man toiling away with his clippers. Recognizing him as an old friend, he came over for a friendly visit! I didn't catch every word of the interchange, but I heard the warmth, I heard the laughter. It was clear they were very glad for the reunion. The younger feller even carried the pile of trimmings and added it to his load. In turning aside from his mission to the bulky waste site in order to greet another human being, this neighbor chose life!

This may not strike you as a life-altering encounter. Lynn and Tommy may have already forgotten that it even happened! But I noticed it. And I raise it up now as a way of inviting each one of us to ponder what it might mean to choose life today. What does it mean for you to respond to the great admonition: choose life? This question I raise on our own homecoming Sunday, in the greatest of hope. Amen!

