

MOSES GOT IT RIGHT
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 The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
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Choose life. One of the most important verses in the Hebrew Bible. Choose life. As if any healthy person needs to be told! But in our first reading today, Moses was not just making friendly conversation. He was reminding the people that they had agreed to a covenant with God and if they knew what was good for them, they would remember that always. The life he recommended was life with God.

The Book of Deuteronomy is one long sermon up to this chapter 30. It is Moses' last sermon before the Israelites crossed over into the Promised Land without him. He knew the dangers ahead: the idols that would tempt the people away from Yahweh, the everyday work of settling down that would cause the people to put covenant matters aside, the fading memories of slavery and the wilderness that would take away the immediacy of depending on their God.

But an interesting thing about Deuteronomy is that while the story is set after the Exodus from Egypt, the book was discovered and presented to the people at the end of the Exile. Those are the two pivot points in the Hebrew Bible: the Exodus and the Exile. All the other books of the Old Testament circle around those two dramatic events. In the setting of the story, the people have already escaped from Egypt—the Exodus—traveled through the wilderness and will soon realize their promised destination. Moses must give them a last reminder as we might do for a child: *watch out for cars... don't talk to strangers*. This is the end of the Exodus story. But in the actual reading of the book, centuries later, the people have already ignored Moses' warning and their disobedience to the Covenant led to their destruction as a nation and their Exile.

Choose life. Moses deliberately invokes a legal setting, calling cosmic witnesses—heaven and earth—to hear that the people have been given a choice. If you stay faithful—*loving the Lord your God, obeying him and staying fast to him... you and your descendants will have length of days, living in the land the Lord your God swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*.

That quote is particularly important to me. Growing up in Brooklyn, I knew many Jews and was always curious about their religion. Protestants I got; my Danish relatives were all Lutheran, but I didn't get to actually study Judaism until my last semester as an undergrad at WestConn, many years later, when I took a course in Jewish History taught by a local rabbi. The course was on history, but in conversations we had outside of class, he told me that to really understand the core of Judaism, I had to know two words from Deuteronomy: *Choose life*. He did not believe in an afterlife. He said your afterlife was your legacy, what you do in your life that lives on after you. He told me that if a funeral procession and a wedding procession reached an intersection at exactly the same time, the wedding procession would proceed first. Life had priority.

When I went off to seminary at Yale Divinity School, planning to be a religion journalist until God smacked me upside the head, I had never studied the Bible. We had two Bibles in my home as I was growing up. One was a large, red leather Douay Bible, the translation used in Catholic Churches at the time, with full-page portraits of several popes in the front. My mother thought it would look nice on a coffee table, as it did, but I don't remember anyone but me browsing through it. The other Bible was a tiny-print King James Bible given to my father as a child in the Lutheran Church—a Bible much too difficult to read. So I entered my first Old Testament class in September of 1983 with no experience of the Bible other than what was read in church. My rabbi said if I really wanted to learn scripture, I should MEMORIZE. And I did, beginning with this same passage from Deuteronomy. The following summer when I attended Yale's Intensive Language Program, studying a year of Hebrew in six weeks, much of it with tears of frustration washing down my face, my rabbi said MEMORIZE. And so I did: Choose Life. Always Choose Life.

But... While I firmly believe that being in close, and *true*, relationship with God, however one defines God in different religions, would make for a better life, I also know that many deeply faithful men and women now lie under tons of rubble in Turkey. And I've stood beside so many people dying, or terribly sick, whose faith had been their hallmark for their entire lives. They had all chosen life as Moses presented it, loving and obeying the Lord their God. And yet...

I found a poem written by a Jewish poet that helped me to make sense of this... doubt... of mine. The poet's name is Estelle Nachimoff Padawer.

I used to mumble many words in the prayerbook
without much thought
even *all wise, all good, all powerful God*
until dear Clara was felled by a stroke
She who always did for others
Now helpless shorn of dignity
The contradiction of *those words*
struck me then
forced me to shake my head
over and over again

But saying no
and saying nothing are not for me

I need to say yes
--yes to a soap bubble afloat in sunshine
--to a newborn baby's perfect fingernails
--to a child reading a first sentence
--to the look of love that lights a face

I do not ask Who or How
I just say yes.

You, who have become my dear friends, are about to enter your Promised Land, with a new and most-capable priest walking beside you. There will be distractions: unimportant things that become idols worshipped instead of God. Be alert for that. There will be hard work because having a priest among you does not lessen the load and *please* do not expect him to carry the heaviest part. Do not forget your wilderness when priests like myself came and went and *you* carried the faith and love of God yourselves, and did it quite wonderfully. And never forget that even when sadness seems to color your lives, there will always be soap bubbles and baby's fingernails and love, which this parish is so capable of giving and receiving.

My own congregation in Brewster crossed our own wilderness into an unknown that has become for us a Promised Land of faith and love. We learned: Stick with God and God will stick with you!

Choose Life, loving and obeying the Lord your God, and holding fast to this Holy One who loves you passionately and will never let you flounder. For that means life to you and length of days in your Promised Land, this now-whole Grace Episcopal Church. AMEN.

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37.