

Posture of Mindfulness
Deuteronomy 30: 15-30
September 24, 2023
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We've been jumping around the bible this season of creation, because it turns out creation and ethics are all over the place. Today we go way back in the history of the Israelite people. They were enslaved in Egypt. God liberated them, using Moses and his sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron, to lead them. Then they wandered in the dessert for forty years. Where we pick up today they are on the edge of entering the fertile land God had promised them. Moses is a very old man, about to die, and he summarizes all of the Law they've received during their wandering and toward the end of his summary, he says this:

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Deuteronomy 30:15-30

15 Today I have set before you life and what's good, or death and disaster. 16 For today I command you to love the Lord, your God, to follow God's ways and keep the commandments, the laws and the customs. If you do, you will live and increase [MSG: so that you will live, really live, live exuberantly], and the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your hearts stray and you do not listen to me, if you let yourself be drawn into the worship of other gods, and serve them, 18 I tell you today, you will not survive. You will not live long in the land which you are now crossing the Jordan to enter and occupy.

19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, 20 by loving the Lord, your God, by obeying God's voice and by clinging to God. For that will mean life for you, a long life in the land [MSG: long life settled on the soil] which God swore to give to the descendants of Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, and Leah and Rachel and Jacob.

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I may have told you before about my running partner when I lived in Tacoma. Her name was Shannon and two or three times a week we would run together—always the same path past a community garden, through a park, along the edge of a college campus, and back on a steep uphill trail through the woods that rewarded us at the top with a view of the sun rising over Mount Rainier—the ancient volcano covered in rivers of ice always put everything in perspective.

It sounds idyllic when I describe it that way. In reality, we weren't very fast and were often gasping for breath on the hills, because we talked the whole way. Some of it was profound. Lots of it was the inconsequential stuff of daily life—the comedy specials and irrigation systems and strategies for potty training. And we analyzed people. That was our favorite topic. What's going on in this relationship? Why can't I get along with this person? Why on earth would that person have done that?

Shannon's refrain was always, "Everybody's got choices"—which comes from a very obscene rap song—but that doesn't make it any less true. A friend's kid insisting on wearing shorts on a 30 degree day? Everybody's got choices. Someone opting to end a relationship? Everybody's got choices. Deciding to have dessert first? Everybody's got choices.

It was often kind of flippant and not infrequently a snarky way of disapproving—although we are both firmly in the dessert first camp. But deep down it really was an acknowledgment of the power of choice. We *do* have choices. We can't choose everything. But we do choose some things. Everybody's got choices.

If anything, we have the problem of too many choices. I told you last week that Goodreads offered 1,392 recommendations for books on simple living. There are currently 3,059 pairs of sneakers in my size available on Zappos. I mean, I'm often paralyzed just trying to choose between the dozen different kinds of floss at Kroger. So we turn to reviews and recommendations to help us decide. Without a guide, it's all just too much.

There are countless demands for our attention and claims on our loyalty: the lure of status and success, the illusions that we can have security and control. Moses's last word to these people he's led for forty years is that they get to choose. We can't choose everything, but we can choose an awful lot. And some choices give life and some deal death.

And notice—Moses connects the choice to the flourishing of the land. We're having to relearn that, but our ancestors knew it in their bones, and indigenous communities around the globe never forgot: Human life is not separate from planetary life. We're entangled. Our choices can drain aquifers millennia in the making, or save southern white rhinos. We can fuel terrible fires, or we can leave oil in the ground, money on the table.

Saying that death can be the consequence of our choices isn't about punishment by a vengeful god. It's just reality. When we tell a kid they'll burn their hand if they touch the stove, it's not that the burn is a punishment we're going to give them. It's just reality. A hot stove's just going to burn you. Every time. Choices have consequences. Some give life. Some don't.

A lot are complicated. So, we need a guide. That's what the Law is all about.

We Christians have a bad habit of completely dismissing the Law, which Jews call Torah. We say we're saved by grace, not law.

And there's truth to that. Gracious truth. But it's not everything Paul wrote. Jesus said he did not intend to abolish the law. If anything, he intensified the ethics in the law. Not just don't kill, but watch out even when you're just angry.

As Americans we don't tend to like anything that impinges on our sense of personal freedom. Our country was founded by people who went where they wanted and took what they wanted and declared it all to be God's will. And so we chafe at passages like this that seem to limit our freedom.

But our Jewish siblings don't see the Law as an imposition, or a list of obscure, anachronistic rules. For them it's a gift. A goal. A guide. The word they use, Torah, doesn't actually mean law or rules. It means direction, or instruction, or guide. The root word carries the image of causing something to fly straight and true. It's the fletching on an arrow. It's bumper rails when we're bowling. It's a trellis for our pole beans and sugar snap peas.

Everybody's got choices. Some give life. Some don't. The truth is, we often need help knowing which is which. That's the gift Moses is leaving with his people.

Like the rest of the Bible, Torah, or the Law, requires interpretation and adaptation for different cultures and times. We don't stone children for disrespect anymore. We wear cotton/polyester clothes. I mostly don't eat meat, but I adore bacon. More importantly, we rightfully reject slavery and the belief that women are property. We honor the beauty and holiness of all kinds of love—regardless of gender. Those are good and right interpretations. The practice of reinterpreting Torah goes all the way back to the Bible itself.

The call has never been to take the Bible or its rules literally. It's to take it seriously. Arrows do fly more true with fletching. Bumper rails do help when we're learning to bowl. And those sugar snap peas will produce a larger harvest when given a structure to grow on. We thrive with appropriate constraint and guidance.

Everybody's got choices. We get to choose, in big ways and little ways, how will we nurture life for ourselves, and the people and earth around us? How will we participate in God's gracious work?

Those are such big questions. And when we get in the weeds, there are no perfect answers. But we do have guidance. Torah asks us to consider: Is it loving? Is it kind? Is it just? How does it affect the most vulnerable—the widow living solely on social security, the child in foster care, the migrant from Venezuela? Does it make the land more fertile, the air and the water cleaner? Does it move the last to the front of the line? Does it leave enough for everyone?

Out of the countless choices available to us in any given moment, what will give life?

And note—the choice that will give life does not always mean physical life. We're having holy, holy conversations at 9am each week about how we make choices around the time of death. Sometimes the most lifegiving choice is letting this life be over and surrender to the life beyond. These things are complicated.

We need each other to figure that out. Scripture was created in community and for community. Life is a group project.

And we need space in our lives. If we're going to make intentional, thoughtful, mindful choices, we have to slow down, slow way down. When I'm in a hurry, I scrape my car on concrete walls in parking garages. All the time. I don't make good choices when I hurry. We need space and time to ask ourselves questions like: Would this choice feel like life? Would it make it easier to breathe? Does the thought of it flood me with relief? Does it energize me? Or soften me? Or connect me with others?

Or does it make me feel tight and trapped and afraid and mean and exhausted and alone?

God desires life for us—for all creation, life and life abundant.

And the incredibly gracious good news is that we do get to choose—not everything—but many things. We get to choose how we will live. With Love's gracious fletching on our arrows, and bumpers on our lane, and trellis for our vines, we can choose actions of hope and love and life—abundant, exuberant, entangled life.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023