

“Choose Life and Live”
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church

Tripp Brogdon
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Well, folks. We've done it. This is now my 5th Sunday with y'all, and you haven't gotten rid of me yet! All joking aside, this past month has been incredible for me. I have been in awe as I have experienced true hospitality as you have welcomed me into your community. You have shown it in so many ways. I have received cards and phone calls, smiles and hugs, and, of course, lots of food!

Let's see. There was the pantry full of supplies at my new home waiting for me to move in, a reception complete with a cake with my face on it, the meals that I have shared with many of you at your invitation, and leftovers from our Wednesday night potluck.

For all of the adjustments that come with a new pastor moving to a church, I have to say everything has run incredibly smooth.

I was able to preach my first four sermons, which focused on God's calling us, loving us, nourishing us, and finally sending us out together. I planned that theme in advance of coming here, and I hand-picked the verses that led to those messages. My goal was to encourage us in our new life together, knowing that God has promised to be with us through it all.

Now that I've concluded that series, I've turned myself back over to my normal way of selecting scriptures for weekly worship: the Revised Common Lectionary.

It has always been an adventure for me when I sit down and discover what the coming week's selection will be. One week you get the 23rd Psalm, another you can get the Feeding of the 5,000, and another you can get an inspiring call story like Isaiah: "Here I am. Send me!"

And then some weeks you get something like this: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell."

Whatever it is that you are feeling right now, that is exactly what I was feeling when I first read it too. But as we say, this too is the Word of the Lord.

Now, I will never be an old school, hellfire and brimstone preacher, but I do believe in God's judgment. I'll admit, though, reading scripture (and now preaching on scripture) that talks about judgment and issues concerning life and death make me uncomfortable. It makes me a little nervous because it makes me confront my own sin. And it makes me a little nervous because of how I feel God's judgment has been twisted into a tool of fear.

My concerns of the text reminded me of a story told by Rev. Dr. Tom Long, a preaching professor at several schools but most recently at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

He said:

“One day I was walking across the campus and one of my students hailed me and said, ‘Dr. Long, could I speak to you for a minute?’

I said, ‘I’m going to get a cup of coffee, you want to go?’

She did, and as we were sharing coffee, she told me what was on her mind. She said that she was serving as a field education student in a local church and that her supervising pastor was requiring her to preach next Sunday.

I said, ‘Good.’

She said, ‘No. It is not good. He’s making me preach on the lectionary.’

I said, ‘Good.’

She said, ‘It’s not good. Have you read the lectionary text for week? They’re all about judgment. I don’t believe in judgment. I believe in grace. I believe in mercy. I believe...it took me three years of therapy to get over judgment. I am not going to preach judgment.’

We talked about it for a while and then we moved on to other things, and she started to tell me about her family life. She and her husband have several children, only the youngest of whom—a teenage boy—was at home and he was giving them [all they could handle]. He was into drugs, maybe dealing them, in trouble with the police.

She said, 'Like last night we were sitting at supper, we had no idea where our son was. In the middle of supper, he comes in the back door and I said would you like some supper and he practically spit at us. He just stomped down the hall to his room and slammed the door.'

She said, 'My husband got up and turned on ESPN. That is always his response to this.'

She said, 'I don't know, something got into me. I'm afraid of my son physically. Physically afraid of my own son! But something got into me and I got up from the table and I went down to his room and I pushed open the door and I said to him, 'You listen to me. I love you so much I am not going to put up with this.'

I said, Caroline, I think you just preached a sermon on judgment. God loves us so much God will not put up with the foolishness in our lives.'

God loves us so much God will not put up with the foolishness in our lives.

God loves us so much that God has set life and death before us.

God loves us so much that God lets us choose between the two.

Our selection from Deuteronomy that we heard earlier is part of Moses' farewell speech to the people of Israel. This speech is being given to a people who have been driven from their land, demoralized, and confused. They were at a crucial and new point in their history, unsure of what was to come next. And Moses gives them this piece of advice: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Choose life and live!

I'm telling you, I'm not sure Moses knew it or not when he said it, but it would make a great bumper sticker!

On the surface, it seems like an easy decision. Give me life and prosperity over death and adversity. Case closed, right?

Well, unfortunately our lives can complicate things quite a bit. We are given choices every day, and we do not always choose life.

The humorist Judith Viorst shares in her book *How Did I Get to be Forty and Other Atrocities*--she writes:

*"I've finished six pillows in Needlepoint,
And I'm reading Jane Austen and Kant,
And I'm up to the pork with black beans in Advanced Chinese Cooking.*

*I don't have to struggle to find myself
For I already know what I want.
I want to be healthy and wise and extremely good-looking.
I'm learning new glazes in Pottery Class,
And I'm playing new chords in Guitar,
And in Yoga I'm starting to master the lotus position.*

I don't have to ponder priorities

For I already know what they are:

To be good-looking, healthy and wise.

And adored in addition.

I'm improving my serve with a tennis pro,

And I'm practicing verb forms in Greek,

And in Primal Scream Therapy all my frustrations are vented.

I don't have to ask what I'm searching for

Since I already know that I seek

To be good-looking, healthy, and wise.

And adored.

And contented.

I've bloomed in Organic Gardening.

And in Dance I have tightened my thighs,

And in Consciousness Raising there's no one around who can top me.

And I'm working all day and I'm working all night

To be good-looking, healthy, and wise.

And adored.

And contented.

And brave.

And well-read.

And a marvelous hostess,

And bilingual,

Athletic,

Artistic...

Won't someone please stop me?"

I wonder if any of you kind of feel like Judith, that you are 'working all day and working all night' making choices that all but ignore what needs to be done to actually choose life and live. All of those things she mentions, her goals, her aspirations, her accomplishments. That may provide temporary happiness, but what she has done is not what it means to choose life and to live.

Instead, she has run herself into exhaustion, into the never-ending cycle of trying to live up to the world's definition of a successful and meaningful life. When we allow ourselves to get caught up in those choices, we essentially choose death.

Rev. Dr. Brett Younger, Pastor of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn puts it like this, "Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter. Modern life is impoverished with a lack of purpose. We rush to meet deadlines that are insignificant and bow before ideas that are not worthy. [[Feasting on the Word](#), pp. 341, 343].

That slow process of death is not what God wants for you and me. God wants us to have life and to live. But that requires us to make the choice to live.

Thankfully for us, our text from Deuteronomy tells us what that choice looks like.

Verses 19 and 20 say, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you.”

Choosing life means loving God.

Choosing life means obeying God.

Choosing life means holding fast to God.

Choosing death means loving ourselves more than God.

Choosing death means obeying the selfish demands of our lives.

Choosing death means holding fast to ourselves alone.

In my short time with you here at St. Andrew,

I have seen so many of you choose life.

I have seen you love God.

I have seen you obey God.

I have seen you hold fast to God.

As we move forward together, it will be important for us to recognize that each and every day life and death is set before us, and we must choose.

As we start envisioning together where St. Andrew goes from here, life and death will be set before us, and we must choose.

As we live together in community with the joys and adversities that come with that, life and death will be set before us, and we must choose.

As we work to reach out to a world in need, life and death will be set before us, and we must choose.

Friends, I pray that when we do, we will choose life, because that is what God wants for us, for the church, and for the world.

Remember that God loves us so much God will not put up with the foolishness in our lives.

Life and death is set before us.

Choose to love God.

Choose to obey God.

Choose to hold fast to God.

Choose life and live!

May it be so, now and always. Amen.