

Choose Life!

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Deuteronomy 30:1-15

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you,² and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today,³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you.⁴ Even if you are exiled to the ends of the

world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. ⁵The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. ⁶Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. ⁷The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you. ⁸Then you shall again obey the LORD, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, ⁹and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?”

¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?”

¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

I was drawn to this Old Testament reading, appointed by the Common Lectionary for this day, because it is a lesson about the importance of words for people of faith. It is about the strong connection between the language we use and how we behave; about the value of the promises we make and their connection to how we live our daily lives.

The Bible ties our words to our ethics in very important ways, and it does so against a culture in which words have become cheap and weasel-y things. When the church proclaims, “The Word of the Lord; thanks be to God,” we are asserting that this biblical word is important, in a time when, to quote one of my colleagues, language is under assault. We in the church, for example, speak about “the gospel truth” and we quote Jesus saying He is the Truth; and yet we live in this post-modern time of relative truths – you have your truth, and I have my truth so what on earth can anyone mean by *the* Truth? We argue about how to parse words for what they *really* communicate; we use “political correctness” as a principle that either gives meaning *to* words, or robs meaning *from* words, depending on your point of view. From both sides of the political divide in our country, we have been urged to pay more attention to what people *do* than what they *say*, as if what someone says can hardly ever be trusted anymore.

In a very short span of time, when you consider the vast expanse of human history, the written word, which used to be expensive and precious, has morphed through social media and the internet - into an endless stream of chatter, often with little value at all. I have become convinced that one of the church’s high callings is to be good stewards of our sacred speech, and to make sure that at least the language of faith continues to have redemptive meaning. And I know that the church is not the only place in which this urgency to insist that words have value is being felt.

Marilyn McEntyre is a professor in the medical school at the University of California and has written a book called: *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*. She describes how words have become devalued,

writing: “Like food, language has been industrialized. Words come to us processed like cheese, depleted of nutrients, flattened and packaged, artificially colored and mass marketed.”¹

Sharing her concern the writer, environmentalist and cultural critic, Wendell Berry, observes that there are two epidemic illnesses of our time, “the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons,” which he says are closely related to the disintegration of language. “My impression,” Berry writes, “is that we have seen, for perhaps a hundred and fifty years, a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning.” He argues that when the language we use to describe a thing – a bird, a grove of trees, a human person – becomes degraded... we *also* degrade the thing itself.²

So if this is our contemporary reality – that we live in a time when we are so inundated with words that have become flimsy and undependable, then what does it mean for the church – to be People of God’s Word; to be people who believe that God is revealed to us by this ancient speech of holy scripture, to be people who trust our own worshipful words to have transformative power to imbue our lives with meaning and value?

The title of this book, Deuteronomy, is taken from its opening words in Hebrew which mean - literally, “these are the words.” Except for the final chapter’s account of the death of Moses, there is no action in the whole Book of Deuteronomy, only words spoken as commandment, instruction, preaching and exhortation. In our reading this morning, the people of ancient Israel stand on the threshold of their inheritance. Moses has just reminded them that; God called them to be his covenant people, God freed them from slavery in Egypt, God led them, and fed them, as they journeyed through the wilderness, and now they stand at the edge of the Promised Land.

¹ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) p. 7.

² McEntyre, p. 16

Before you go into the land, Moses tells the people, you have a choice to make;

God has set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments by loving God and walking in his ways, then you will live... But if you do not hear God's word and turn away – you will perish.

Moses is asking the people to respond to God's gifts of life – by keeping their word. And then Moses does the most amazing thing; he calls the people to swear this solemn oath as if they were in court:

I call heaven and earth as witnesses, that they may testify to this truth – by the grace of God...before you lies life and death, blessings and curses. You are free to choose, but I urge you to choose life that you and your descendents may live.

What does it mean *to choose life*? It means to keep our word, to acknowledge that life itself is a gift from God, and in return, to love God, to obey God's commandments, to hold fast to God. There is not a word in this passage of scripture that is not deeply layered in riches of meaning, but I want to point out the one word that I find stunningly revealing. It is the word - "Choose." It is a common Hebrew word in the Old Testament, but here in these verses it is used in a way that it is never used anywhere else in all of scripture. Everywhere else, when this word is used, God is always the subject of this word, God alone chooses – except for here. Here, on the edge of the Promised Land, in their newborn freedom, God's human children are made the subject of this word "to choose."

You choose the life God intends for you, Moses is saying. Be faithful as those made in the image and likeness of God; keep your solemn oath, your word. Your life is only as good as your word to love,

and obey, and hold fast to God. So here we have this formative text from a book of the Bible called, Deuteronomy, “These are the words,” which lays out God’s words and our human response as a matter of life and death.

Keeping our word is to receive the gifts of life from the gracious hand of God, and to respond by living up to our promise to walk in God’s ways. We do not have to stretch our imaginations too far to know the truth of this, because our lives are filled with promises that give life itself meaning. Here in this place we hear, and say, so many other formative, life-giving words: *You are mine*, God says to us, *and I am yours*.

I hold you in the palm of my hands. Nothing can separate you from my love. Your sins are forgiven... so be at peace.

And we respond to God’s word by making life-giving promises to each other: In marriage: *I take you to be mine....in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live...* In baptism: *I promise to live the Christian faith and teach that faith to my child...* In leadership as church leaders: *I promise to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.* And we take sacred speech home with us: *I love you... I forgive you... I am praying for you...* These words give us life!

Not long ago, I got completely absorbed in the recent, powerful memoir of Paul Kalanithi – *When Breath Becomes Air*. The book recounts how this graduate from Stanford University, with a Masters in English, became a Yale educated neurosurgeon. His passion for language created in him a great interest in how the brain uses our neurons to make meaning of our lives. He ultimately discovered profound meaning in his own life by facing his premature death to cancer.

His life saving work as a neurosurgeon was never disconnected from what he understood about the power of words. “I had come to see language as an almost supernatural force, existing between people, bringing our brains... into communion. A word meant something only between people, and life’s meaning, its virtue, had something to do with the depth of the relationships we form. It was the relational aspect of humans – i.e., ‘human relationality’ – that undergirded meaning...” He goes on: “There must be a way, I thought, that the language of life as experienced – of passion, of hunger, of love – bore some relationship, however convoluted, to the language of neurons, digestive tracts, and heartbeats. I began to see all disciplines as creating a vocabulary, a set of tools for understanding human life in a particular way.”³

So long before such advanced neurological understanding could connect language and life’s meaning, Moses stood before a people on the edge of choice and said – there is a covenant connection between the word of God and life itself.

Words matter. What we say matters because our promises bear up our behavior – as a matter of life and death. *Choose life that you may live* means, above all things, be a person of your word. Live the life you profess is a gift from God – as God would have you live it: loving God in word and deed and loving one another. Choose life that you may live!

AMEN.

³ Paul Kalannithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016) p. 39.