

“CHOOSE LIFE”
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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Paper or plastic? The time was when we had to make that decision regularly at the grocery store check-out counter. Thanks to a state government which is seeking to protect our environment, that time has passed. But you and I are still faced with countless decisions on any given day and throughout our lives. Some are small decisions that are not all that consequential: LaBonne’s or Stop & Shop, pepperoni or sausage, blue sweater or red sweater, Jimmy Kimmel or Jimmy Fallon. And then, some are big decisions that can change or shape the course of our entire life journey: UConn or UMass, Episcopalian or Methodist, to marry or not to marry a certain person, to retire here in Connecticut or move to a warmer, less expensive part of the country. Decisions, decisions! They’re a constant, everyday occurrence in our lives.

However, there is one type of decision that is entirely unique, that is bigger and more consequential than any of the decisions I’ve already mentioned. We call it a “life-or-death decision.” At certain points in our lives we may be confronted with a matter of extreme urgency, and our very survival depends on the choice we make. “To be or not to be; that is the question.”

Sometimes, a life-or-death decision is dramatic and obvious. If we are diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, we have to decide whether to undergo treatment and then choose what kind of treatment we’re willing to tolerate. If we are 30 years old, the choice might be clear-cut; if we are 90 years old, the choice might look very different; but in either case, we are making a life-or-death decision.

I once knew a successful businessman in his early fifties whose life had become dominated by his abuse of alcohol. His family became increasingly concerned about his drinking and other negative behaviors associated with it. They decided to stage an intervention and asked me as their pastor to participate. The family members also enlisted a chemical dependency counselor who had made arrangements ahead of time with a treatment center so this alcoholic man would have a place to go to if he agreed to accept help.

The fateful day arrived, and family members and friends gathered in this man’s living room. The chemical dependency counselor got right to the point. He outlined the issue as he saw it, and then all those who were present contributed their impressions of the man’s drinking problem. I will never forget what the counselor then said: “My friend, alcoholism is a fatal illness. If you don’t stop drinking, it’s going to kill you. There is no cure for this disease, but there is the possibility of recovery. You have that option, and a treatment center is ready to receive you if you are willing to go there. I want to impress upon you that this is a life-or-death choice. If you continue drinking, you are choosing certain death; if you stop drinking and practice recovery principles, you are choosing life. The choice is now yours.”

As the intervention proceeded it was clear that this alcoholic man felt ambushed and angry. When everyone in the room had finished speaking, he lashed out in defensiveness, denied that he had a problem, and refused to go to treatment. The meeting ended; the counselor and I

left the home; and the alcoholic, according to his wife, resumed his heavy drinking that very night. About five years ago, I learned that he had died from the effects of alcoholism.

Thankfully, few of us have to make a momentous decision like that one very often. But the fact is, you and I are faced with life-or-death decisions every day; it's just that they are not dramatic and obvious. We make little decisions that, over time, add up and amount to big decisions: today, am I going to be an exercise walker or a couch potato? Do I choose a cup of fruit or a bowl of ice cream? Will I spend fifteen minutes in an attitude of prayer or fifteen minutes in a state of worry?

When confronted with a choice between life or death, the preferred choice seems clear and easy for sensible people. Why would anyone choose a path that leads to certain death, when the path to a healthy, productive life is readily accessible? But many people do choose death, and I'm not just talking about those who abuse their bodies or commit suicide.

In the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses is giving his farewell speech to the Hebrew people shortly before his life ends. He reminds them of their covenant with God, which involves obeying certain commandments, decrees, and ordinances. He tells them that if they obey God's commandments they will live, multiply in number, and receive God's blessing. But if they choose to forsake their covenant obligations and serve other gods, their time in the Promised Land will be short-lived and they will perish. Moses then says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

What today's text doesn't tell us, but what we know from reading further in the Old Testament, is that the Hebrew people choose death over life. They soon default on their covenant with Yahweh and start worshiping other gods. Here in the wilderness, Moses presents them with a life-or-death choice, and the choice Israel makes eventually results in the nation being conquered and sent into exile.

"I have set before you life and death." Again, it seems incredible that, presented with such a choice, people would choose the path of sure destruction. But it happens all the time in the lives of individuals, communities, and, yes, even churches. Most folks say they want to live and live abundantly. They say they want the groups to which they belong to flourish and prosper. However, judging from their actual behavior, they exhibit a death wish – by neglecting to take care of themselves, by refusing to make wise choices that ensure a positive future. I am not immune to this tendency, and neither, I imagine, are some of you.

But thanks be to God, there are also individuals and groups that find themselves in life-or-death situations and choose life. They are the ones I want to hold up before you this morning as models of hope.

I'll tell you first about an individual – one whose life experience was similar in some respects to that of my alcoholic acquaintance, but whose choices and outcomes were very different. He was a good friend of mine, a man in his late forties, a prominent lawyer who was active in local and state politics, a loving husband and father of two fine sons. But he was slowly dying before our eyes. He was a workaholic of the worst sort, toiling night and day at his legal practice. As a way of dealing with all the stress of his work, he comforted himself with food to

the point that he became morbidly obese. Then one day while he was in the court room, he had a major heart attack. He was lucky to survive.

When he began his rehabilitation, his doctors spoke to him in no uncertain terms. They told him he had a choice to make about his lifestyle, and his decision would literally make or break his future. He could continue his pattern of overworking and overeating and face an early death, or he could cut back on work and food, develop a new set of healthy habits, and expect to live a normal lifespan. They said to him in effect, “I set before you life and death . . . choose life.”

This friend did not hesitate in making the right choice. After he got out of the hospital, he hired another lawyer for his firm to reduce his own work load; he started exercising, attending Weight Watchers meetings, and eventually lost 100 pounds; and he started a daily practice of prayer and meditation that not only reduced his stress but helped him develop a real relationship with God for the first time. Faced with a life-or-death decision, he chose life.

Now, our text in Deuteronomy reminds us that it is not just individuals who can be forced to make such a decision; whole communities face a similar choice at critical junctures in their histories. I’ll cite an example that hits very close to home. One reads and hears all the time that the state of Connecticut is in a “sorry state” – one of stagnation and decline. We are losing businesses and residents who can no longer afford to make their home here. Great wealth and extreme poverty exist side by side. Violent crime and opioid abuse are rampant in urban centers like Waterbury, Hartford, and Bridgeport. Even quaint, bucolic towns like Woodbury can recite a litany of woes: our population has plateaued, school enrollment is shrinking, property taxes are out the roof, and affordable housing is hard to come by, especially for seniors. Put all of this together, and the message from some is that Connecticut is dying a slow death.

However, there are civic leaders in our state who are choosing to light candles rather than curse the darkness. Soon after I became your pastor, I was blessed to become a part of the Naugatuck Valley Project, an organization based in Waterbury. NVP is a coalition of area churches and service agencies that seek to address issues and affect change on matters of social justice. NVP is not religious body per se, but it does respond to the biblical mandate to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God” (Micah 5:8b). And it does this with a particular emphasis. NVP recognizes that there is a difference between performing acts of kindness for individuals and striving to achieve justice for whole groups of people.

Case in point: as a local congregation, we seek to help persons with limited incomes to get proper nutrition by supporting the Woodbury Food Bank. Some of our own church members are serving as volunteers at the Food Bank during this month of February, and their effort to care for specific individuals is commendable. But NVP has a different kind of mission: it asks, “What are the underlying causes of income disparity and physical hunger in our region? Why do some people have easy access to health care and others do not? Why do certain groups – such as ethnic minorities, domestic workers, and senior adults – fight an uphill battle to receive fair treatment and equal opportunity? And above all, how can these conditions be alleviated?” To ask and answer such questions is to move beyond performing acts of kindness for individuals; it’s an attempt to “do justice” in the wider realm of society.

On January 27, the Naugatuck Valley Project hosted a “Community Gathering” at St. John’s Episcopal Church in downtown Waterbury. Over 100 people from all walks of life gathered to dialogue about community needs and identify ways of producing meaningful change. The energy in the room that night was electrifying. The speakers sent a message that the future of our region is not beyond our control and is therefore promising. They encouraged churches and other organizations to stop complaining about our problems and become a part of the solution to our problems. In sum, NVP leaders set before us life and death and asked us to choose life. We can either take steps to bring new vitality to our region, or we can sit back and watch it slip deeper into the sinkhole of stagnation. The choice is ours.

And then, finally, it occurs to me that churches are confronted with life-or-death choices just like individuals and communities are. On February 3, Methodist pastors and laypersons from this same Naugatuck Valley region gathered for separate meetings with our resident Bishop, Thomas Bickerton. These events were held nineteen miles down the road at the Derby United Methodist Church.

You may not be aware that our sister faith community in Derby has a fascinating history. The building where they worship is an architectural marvel, erected at a time when Derby was a flagship church in our Conference. But the facility now looks old and worn, reflecting trends in the congregation itself. Several years ago, I got acquainted with the man who was their pastor at that time, Jim Midgley. Jim told me that the Derby church is located in an ethnically diverse neighborhood, and yet their membership was all-white in both skin color and hair color. Not surprisingly, worship attendance had dwindled to less than ten on an average Sunday. Back then, the Derby church seemed to have no choice but to close its doors.

But the story didn’t end there. Jim led that tiny congregation through a time of self-evaluation which has had astonishing results. It so happened that the town of Derby had a sizable number of residents who were natives of Ghana, had Methodist backgrounds, and were hungry for a spiritual home in their new setting. After much soul-searching and negotiation, the Derby church redefined its mission and its constituency, and got a new lease on life in the process. Today, it is officially called the Derby Ghana United Methodist Church. My friend Jim Midgley, a very capable pastor but an older white guy like me, was appointed to another church where he is an excellent fit, and Derby is now led by Daniel Asibouh-Sarpong, a native of Ghana. Under Daniel’s shepherding, Derby is again a growing congregation with a vibrant ministry. And it is no secret why. Faced with a choice between life and death, the Derby church chose life.

As many of you know, the Woodbury United Methodist Church has a long and wonderful relationship with Methodists who call Ghana their home. We’ve sent multiple mission teams to Ghana; and now, in a manner of speaking, the Methodists of Ghana have sent a mission team to us. The Derby Ghana UMC serves as a role model for how congregations can renew their strength by enlarging their mission field.

Friends, our own church faces major challenges today, but it would be catastrophic thinking to conclude that we are dying when, in fact, we are thriving in so many ways. At the same time, we need to remember that we as a church make life-or-death choices every single day. The small decisions that we make while we are still relatively strong have long-term consequences; they will either make us stronger, or they will make us weaker.

Some of you remember a time two decades ago when this sanctuary was comfortably full on a typical Sunday. Nowadays it is uncomfortably half-full. Many folks in our community appear to be uninterested in attending church, which leaves us with a choice. Do we sit back and wait for people to get interested and seek us out, or do we take the initiative toward them and try to create an interest? Do we settle for the status quo of stagnation, or do we become proactive and seek to energize our congregation with new people, new ideas, and new ministries?

In the much-acclaimed film, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins plays a character named Andy, an upstanding banker who is framed for the double murder of his wife and her lover. He is forced to begin a new life in the infamous Shawshank prison in the state of Maine. During his long stretch behind bars, Andy puts his accounting skills to work for an amoral warden. Along the way, he earns the admiration of the other inmates for his integrity and unquenchable spirit of hope. One of the older prisoners is named Red, played by Morgan Freeman. Red tells Andy at one point, "Hope will kill you in a place like this." But Andy is undeterred. He tells Red, "You can either go on living, or you can go on dying."

"I have set before you life and death . . . choose life!"