



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

The Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

Sermon Title: "Take Time to Choose"

Sermon Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

As a young law student, I had a job at a law firm downtown that included coming in at the end of the day to back up the computer system data. I had been given a lot of instruction before that first time I was finally left to do my new job unassisted. I happily got through tasks fairly quickly. The office was on the third floor of an repurposed warehouse at the edge of the shipping District in Pittsburgh. I'd been told there was a door at the back of the office that would take me down the back stairs to exit the building, where I was parked, rather than having to walk around the building and down the alley at night. I hadn't really asked for clarity, and was sure it was foolproof. That night, I had somewhere else to get to, so when I got to the back of the building where there were two doors, I chose one and pushed the door open with my hip, while simultaneously rooting for my keys in my backpack. A heavy fire door pushed me aside and slammed, and to quote the words of Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, in the quest for the Holy Grail, I realized I had chosen "poorly."

In my own shortsightedness, foolishness and self-absorption, I was now separated from the inside of the building and standing, not in a stairwell, but on a fire escape. It's after 6 pm, and this is before cell phones. I began walking down the old rusted metal fire escape, but after the first flight of steps, it sinks in- that to actually make it to the ground, and to my car, I have to walk out to lower the boom on the last set of steps, if they will even descend. Or I could jump. There was nothing that would brace that fall, and in fact a lot of things on the ground one might wish to avoid.

I looked in at the second floor office, a group of architects. Through the large window I saw that, as fate would have it, they were having an evening meeting. What's a 22-year-old grad student on a fire escape to do? Lying injured in an alley was not a very appealing prospect. And certainly grimmer than dying of embarrassment. "Behold, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...choose life." After praying, "God you've got to get me through this," (mainly for my own embarrassment) I chose life. I knocked on the plate glass window. As you may imagine, I caused a stir. Using hand gestures and yelling, I convinced them to open their fire door and let me in. While it was hardly the stuff that builds the image a young professional desires, I survived.

But in truth the real “choose life” moment came from those architects. They chose when they could’ve just reacted. They could have reacted differently, and I have to wonder if in fact they would have, had I not checked off the right boxes- young, white, female, professional, i.e. non-threatening. I was helped and believed. No police, no fear, no violence, no “who does she belong to?” No nightly news story. I don’t know that any of my classmates of color would have been given that pass. Not in 1986, and I feel just as confident, I’m afraid to say, not today.

My identity gave me a leg up for sure.

Those who opened that door made a choice. They could have just closed the blinds, or responded with fear. Leaving me on a fire escape in the heart of the trucking hub of the city at night would have been a horrible outcome. Amongst our collective struggles with being shortsighted, foolish or self-absorbed, for the people of Israel, the people in the day of Jesus, and for us- it all comes down to choices, and whether we choose or just react.

By the time the people of Israel who had been wandering for generations are finally poised to enter the promised land, God, through Moses, has spent a very long time preparing them, and giving them a guide for how to live out free will. Repeatedly assuring God’s fidelity to them- to gather them, to bring them back, and bring them into promise and to prosper them- to encourage their faithfulness and trust. But the challenge since the dawn of time, is that we are tempted by the power of free will to react, especially when our security or prosperity feel at stake. When we react, we go for power moves. And we can make ourselves really hard to love.

Henri Nouwen has said, “what makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.” It is a challenge to love God, and one another, to love God’s framework for our common good.

I chose the fire escape story to illustrate that even in something that should be a “no-brainer,” if I had been a homeless person, or elderly and off my meds, or some other exception, the folks with the power to choose life might not have. We don’t choose life universally. We pick and choose with modifiers, disclaimers and exceptions, our “go-to” strategies that often end up causing separations. The heart of God calls us away from this.

When we are unsure, or insecure, what will we turn to?

And will it convince us to choose life and blessing, or the alternatives of adversity, separation, alienation or death?

It is always all before us. In our lesson from Deuteronomy, God is speaking not just to our heads, but to our hearts, from God's heart.

It's the deep longing of heart language we hear in Deuteronomy- choose life. I want you to prosper.

It's heart language in the frustration of Jesus' warning about where the path leads when we all focus on who to cut off, in love with our power to mete out consequences against others.

We have been given a place to dwell, and to thrive, and to grow a future beyond ourselves. God's heart calls to us to choose life, by following God's commandments. There is more power in that path than we often see.

God is calling us away from the love of power and towards the power of love. This is what forges the path of life, God's will for all humanity.

Distractions creep in time and again.

We grow short sighted, foolish and self-absorbed, but God is calling us to perspective. And in our frenetic world, one way to embrace this path is by taking the time to actually choose and not just react- an increasing challenge when one tap on a screen can change everything.

Take time to stand with God at a crossroads and choose. Who do we see, who do we help, who do we believe and who we love.

Remembering who we are, whose we are, and how much our lives have been touched by the power of God's love. Even and especially cared for when we couldn't have imagined it. Receiving grace when we have really missed the mark.

The choice is ever before us. Remembering God's heart for the common good of all creation, let's commit ourselves, as best we can, to choosing to love and to seek life for everyone.