

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany • February 16, 2020**

**Isaiah 58:1-12 • Psalm 112:1-10 • 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 • Matthew 5:13-20**

There are certain phrases that sound helpful but are actually infuriatingly *un*helpful. Today's proverb from Deuteronomy is a good example. "Choose life." It makes it sound as if life presents us with one door that says "Life" and another door that says "Not Life," and all we have to do is pick the right one. But we know that's not true. "Choose life" would be helpful if life were a choose-your-own-adventure novel where the options are all neatly laid out, but it's less helpful when we try to apply it to our actual lived experiences.

Part of the difficulty with "choose life" comes from the inadequacy of our own choices. We often don't have the freedom to choose in meaningful ways. Consider the old canard that people who live in poverty wouldn't be in that situation if they had made better choices. If only they had stayed in school. If only they had read a book. If only they hadn't become a single parent. If you were at the Love Fund event on Thursday at Temple Beth Rishon and you heard the stories of people in our community who are trying to stay out of poverty, you saw how shallow that way of thinking actually is. The problem is not that these families made bad choices. They're often making really good choices. The problem is that the options they have to choose from aren't any good. The choice isn't "Life" or "Death." It's food or rent. It's medicine or car repair. Talking about the importance of making better choices in those contexts seems either terribly naïve or grossly insensitive.

And the other difficulty with "choose life" is that the term "life" is so amorphous. It's easy to talk about life in theory, but it's difficult to define what we actually mean by it. The language of choosing life seems easy until you actually try to do it. To take a common example, if you forego medical treatment that would prolong your life in favor of palliative care that lets you spend more time with your family without debilitating side effects, are you choosing life? It's hard to say. Sometimes our fear of death keeps us from living. Sometimes our desire to preserve life drives us toward death. And sometimes life and death get mixed up with each other, and we can't separate them from each other.

And the admonition to choose life doesn't account for the unintended consequences of our choosing. In 2002, Samantha Power was working as an academic when she wrote a book entitled *The Problem from Hell*, arguing that the U.S. could have done more to prevent the Bosnian genocide in the early 90s.<sup>1</sup> But as she recounts in her recent memoir *The Education of an Idealist*, her optimism about our ability to save lives, to "choose life" as it were, was tempered when she left academia and went into public service.<sup>2</sup> Instead of reflecting on these events, she was now responsible for fixing them. And while it was easy to say what other people should have done about Bosnia after the fact, it was much harder to actually be the one to figure out what to do in Syria. Reflecting on her time in public service she writes, "Even when we try to do right, we invariably end up making situations worse." Perhaps "invariably" is too strong, but you get the idea. Sometimes our efforts to choose life actually cost more lives than they save. Sometimes the doors of Life and Death aren't clearly marked.

So does Moses's admonition to choose life have any meaning for us? Based on what I just said, you could make a pretty good argument that the answer is no. Just throw it out and move onto the gospel reading. But that's too easy. (And today's gospel reading is too hard.) So let's stick with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Power, *The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019).

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It helps to remember the context for this reading from Deuteronomy. The admonition to “choose life” is not an admonition dropped down from the on high, an old adage that’s self-evidently true for all times and places. It’s part of Moses’ long farewell speech. Moses and the Israelites have been wandering through the wilderness for forty years, and the time finally comes for them to enter the promised land. But Moses can’t go in with them, so he gives this long speech. And he reminds the people of what their story is. About how God brought them out of Egypt, how God sustained them in the wilderness, how God led them into this new land, and most of all how God has been faithful to them.

So why does Moses give this long speech? Why not just get to the promised land and say, *We’re here. Have fun. Don’t go crazy with the milk and honey.*? Part of it is that now that God’s people are entering the promised land, they are going to bear responsibility for the communities that they create. Egypt was bad, but the Israelites were enslaved. They weren’t in a position to change anything. So Egypt’s evils weren’t their responsibility. It would have made no sense to hold them accountable for Pharaoh’s actions. But now that they’re in a position to change things, they’re in a position to control the kind of society they create, they bear responsibility for their actions.

It’s similar to the dilemma Samantha Power found herself in when she left academia and went into policy making. In one particularly revealing moment in her memoir, she recounts asking a colleague if she could lay out some potential options for how to address the Syrian civil war and have them passed up the chain for her superiors’ next meeting. To which her colleague responded, “There is no other meeting.” Meaning, you can’t just weigh the possible options, you have to make a choice. Which also means you have to take responsibility.

So Moses is telling God’s people that things are going to be different now. You have the power to create a new kind of society out of scratch, one that’s based on the lovingkindness of God instead of the vindictive whims of Pharaoh. And because you have the power, you also bear the responsibility. So be aware of the decisions you make. You might think that it’s someone else’s decisions who really matter. That the power lies elsewhere. That someone else will take care of things. But that’s not true. Your decisions determine what happens. There is no other meeting.

But the other reason Moses gives this long speech, this is probably the more important part, is because God’s people, the Israelites and us, are going to forget. They’re going to forget where they came from. Instead of saying, “God brought us out of Egypt,” they’ll say, “We brought ourselves out of Egypt. We’re self-made.” Instead of remembering that they were once foreigners in a foreign land, they’ll enslave the foreigners and tell themselves they’ve always been in the promised land. It was the foreigners who invaded our space. And instead of worshipping Yahweh who has all these super inconvenient rules about not murdering people and not enslaving foreigners and not stealing your neighbor’s stuff, they’ll worship the gods who promise material salvation without communal flourishing and individual redemption without personal repentance.

In other words, Moses gives them this long speech to remind them of God’s covenant with them. The covenant shows us that choosing life is not just about making decisions that align with some abstract principle. Life is not just something that is happening or not. It’s qualitative. It has depth to it. How does Moses define life? Life is “loving the LORD your God,” “walking in [God’s] ways,” and “observing [God’s] commandments.” In other words, life means honoring the covenant that God made with you. Life means seeking the welfare of your neighbor. Life means not enslaving the aliens in your land. Life means resisting Pharaoh’s old ways of measuring people’s value by how much they produce for you. And life means remembering that it was God’s initiative that brought you out of Egypt, not your own skills and abilities.

That’s really the key to the whole thing. The “choose” in “choose life” isn’t so much about making good decisions as it is about trusting. Trusting that even when you’re about to cross into this

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new land with a new responsibility, God is with you. And the “life” in “choose life” its not about life as some abstract principle as it is God’s promise to be for us no matter what. And that when we love the Lord, walk in the Lord’s ways, and observe the Lord’s commandments, God’s promises become reality in the lives of our neighbors.

So choose life. But more than that, trust the promise. Trust that God’s new beloved community is coming to fruition in and through the lives of ordinary people like us. Trust that the responsibility we bear for our decisions is the same weight that bends the arc of the universe towards justice. Trust the promise that in Christ, God’s divine life chooses us.

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