

February 15th, 2026

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 “A Promise of Freedom”

Last week we talked about how many church folks either lean towards the God of grace and mercy or to the God of law and order. This week’s scripture is from the literal Law of Moses as found in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy. To make it even more dramatic, this is one of the scriptures that I said the law and order folks use when they want to prove their point. If you obey God’s commandments, you will live, be blessed and prosper. If you don’t and your heart turns away from the law, then you will perish and *not* prosper. I wanted to grab a sound clip from the introduction of the Law and Order television show to play after Kathy read the passage – you know what I’m talking about. That two-beat “dun-dun” that’s supposed to represent a gavel banging or a jail cell door shutting or whatever. But I don’t want to get in trouble with YouTube and Facebook’s copyright police.

I *really* like the Psalm Kathy read -- “*Happy* are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.” There’s a whole lot more carrot and not a lot of stick in that Psalm. But this passage from Deuteronomy? There’s definitely some stick here. Plus there’s this choice that sounds like an ultimatum – “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. 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 and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” So, it’s your choice. You either choose life, or you choose death.

I don’t know about you, but I’m not a big fan of “life or death” situations. I don’t believe I’ve ever been in one – at least that I know of -- but I know a lot of folks who have. The case I’m thinking of specifically involves a retired meteorologist who has been fighting cancer for the last two years. This isn’t his first bout with it either. His life is marked by significant professional and personal achievements. He’s kind of a lone wolf, but he’s a dedicated, loving father and husband and also an avid surfer. He’s faced with two options – do nothing and experience a slow death accompanied by soul-crushing unhappiness and physical pain. Or he could venture out in another direction that *might* give him some more time, but it comes along with significant risks with the same outcome and dramatic physical limitations – just not as soon as if he did nothing. Sometimes he wishes he didn’t have this choice – that some external force would decide for him. As stuck as he feels, it’s the burden of his freedom that scares him the most. He doesn’t want to make the wrong decision.

This is freedom. It can be painful. It's often messy and ambiguous. It's frightening. So much so that it's easy to understand why many people seem willing to exchange freedom for fate. If I believe that I'm fulfilling some kind of destiny as I go through life, I don't bear the same responsibility for my life. It's out of my hands. And it's true. A lot of life is out of our hands. We *are* free – but so is everyone else. We *are* free – but forces beyond us are nevertheless upon us. Our freedom is not absolute, and we certainly aren't guaranteed the wisdom and foresight to be good stewards of the freedom we *do* have. In our passage from Deuteronomy God addresses the people – “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” There is nothing we can do to avoid this weighty freedom. The choice is ours. Do we turn to God, or do we turn away?

Reading this passage from the comfort of our pews, it's not hard to imagine that this is an *easy* decision. Of *course* we'd make the right choice. Of *course* we'd choose life over death. Who wouldn't? Who would prefer curses over blessings? Not me! Yet this is the choice that God sets before the Israelites. And as we see throughout the scriptures, the Israelites constantly struggled with this – individually and more important collectively. And if you believe as we do in our faith tradition that *all* people are God's people we have to own up to the fact that we

struggle with it too. We struggle with choosing life over death – blessings over curses.

Just a few miles from here runs the Pacific Crest Trail. It stretches from Mexico all the way to Canada. Thousands of people hike it every year. It feels permanent — like it's always been there. But it hasn't. Before it was *the* trail, it was just a series of decisions. At some point, someone walked a direction. Others followed. Grass wore down. Footing became visible. Eventually people said, "This is the way." Over decades, pieces were connected, cleared, marked, and maintained. What started as "a" path became *the* path.

And once it's there — it's easy to stay on. The ground is packed. The brush is cleared. The direction is obvious. You don't have to think much. You just put your foot where the last person put theirs. That's how paths work. And it's how lives work. No one just pops awake in the morning and says, "Gee, I think I want to build a road toward destruction today!" No. It's happens with small steps. A habit. A reaction. A compromise. A grudge held a little too long. A shortcut taken because it's easier. You walk it once. Then twice. Then ten times. Eventually the ground gets packed down. And what started as a choice starts to feel like destiny. "It's just who I am." "It's just how things are." "It's the only way." Or worst of all —

“It’s too late to go back now.” But it’s *not* the only way. It’s just the most worn one.

When Moses stands before the people and says, “choose life,” He’s not talking about one dramatic decision. He’s talking about direction. Because every choice is a footprint. And every repeated footprint becomes a trail. And every trail leads somewhere. The path toward resentment becomes wide. The path toward generosity *can* become just as wide. It’s just that the path toward resentment, indifference, and whatever else becomes easy.

But … the path toward love can become just as natural — if it’s walked often enough. The tragedy is not that destructive paths exist. The tragedy is that we forget we’re still choosing them. “Choose life,” says Moses. Not once. But today. And tomorrow. And the day after that. Because the future isn’t fate. It’s a path. And we are wearing it into the ground with every step.

We don’t live in a vacuum. We are building paths together. And right now, if we’re honest, some of the widest paths in our world are not leading to life. The path of contempt is well worn. The path of assuming the worst about one another is easy to follow. The path of retreating into our corners feels safe. We didn’t wake up one morning and decide to build a divided world. We just kept taking the same small steps. The same suspicions. The

same habits of speech. And now the ground is packed down.

But here's the good news. Paths can be changed the same way they were formed. One step at a time. You don't redirect a trail with a bulldozer.

You begin by stepping differently. So what would it look like this week to choose life in one small, deliberate way? Not in theory. In practice. Maybe it means pausing before responding. Maybe it means asking one more question instead of making one more assumption. Maybe it means praying for someone you disagree with — not that they would change, but that you would love them because it's the right thing to do and it's what God calls us to do. Maybe it means refusing to share something that fuels outrage. Maybe it means initiating one honest, gentle conversation. See? Small steps. Because every time you step in the direction of love, the grass bends. Every time you choose generosity over fear, the ground shifts. Every time you choose curiosity over contempt, a new path begins.

“Choose life,” says Moses. Not abstractly. But relationally. Practically. Today. And if enough of us take even one step, this community will begin to wear a different trail. And that trail will lead somewhere. It will lead to life.