

Once and Forever? Not So Much.

Only God is forever

Covenant

Perhaps you are familiar with this pattern of life. We are born, and we go along, day by day, then all of a sudden there comes turning point, or some sort of precipice in our lives. Our first day of school is such a turning point, graduations are turning points, as are other major life changes. Raise your hand if that pattern of Ordinary time, Change Now!, ordinary time, Change Now! sounds something like your life journey.

Such is also the pattern of Israel's journey, Israel's story. I want to recall the context of this morning's lesson from Deuteronomy for us. Broad Brush Stroke - or Big Picture Context. The Hebrew people went to Egypt to escape famine in their land. In time, over time Egypt forced them into slavery then how the people suffered. God heard their cries and called Moses to lead them from slavery into the Land of Promise. That journey from Egypt and slavery took 40 years, and became an ordinary time in it's own right.

Today's lesson is as it were, at the edge of the River Jordan, at the edge of a whole new life, a whole new beginning as the people are about to enter the Land of Promise with more options than Israel had ever known. Moses speaks to the people on the eve of their whole new life, and our lesson is the last paragraph of a very long speech. "You have a choice!" Moses says. "Life and what is good, versus death and what is wrong."

"If you will walk in the ways of God, in the way of the Covenant you will have life, life that is beyond simple abundance. Life that is shalom. Life that is blessing. Life that is joy. Life that is "exuberant."
(Exuberant from The Message, Eugene Peterson, Tr. Bible

Gateway.com)If you will walk in other ways, you will have death - existence without joy, without shalom, without meaning, without covenant, without purpose, you will have an existence that is a living death, O'Donovan's paraphrase, without the Covenant of God, you will have an existence that is a living hell.

“So,” Moses continues, I call heaven and earth to testify that indeed I have faithfully called you to, ‘choose life so that you and your children’s children might have life.’ And you will love the Lord your God. You will obey God. You will remain true to God. For God the Lord is your very life.”

Now one might think that making the turn, or jumping off the precipice, or crossing the Jordan river, or choosing Life is a once and forever decision, just as some expressions of the church have taught that becoming a Christian is a once and forever decision. I believe we are saved because, God is, and we are. I believe that since we are, we are saved because we are beloved.

I believe that becoming Christian is a life - long process. Someone speaking with Maya Angelou, once described an older, mutual friend as a Christian. Dr. Angelou responded, “All ready?”

One may well encounter Christ in such a powerful way that one is forever different. I still believe that becoming Christian will go on until we each draw our last breath. I believe that becoming Christian is a life long process of again, and again, and yet again, “Choosing life.” Hold that thought for a moment: becoming Christian is a process of choosing life again and again and yet again.

Choosing life for ourselves, our congregation, for creation.

What I just said is about us, as individual persons, but if we return to the context of this lesson, we clearly see that Moses is speaking to a people, not just a collection of individuals but the people of the Exodus. A people formed and claimed by God who will become the nation Israel.

I would ask this question, what would it mean for the people

America to choose life?

What could it mean for us, the people who are the First Congregational Church of East Hartford to choose life? As a church, not just as individuals?

What could it mean for us to choose life environmentally or politically? What could it mean for us to choose life in terms of our mission? What could it mean for us to choose life in terms of our worship?

What could it mean for us to choose life spiritually?

I don't know exactly. So let's try something new and see what happens.

I do believe that to choose life spiritually is completely and totally foundational to us both as individual people and more importantly as a people, as God's people, as First Congregational Church of East Hartford. I do know that to choose life spiritually is, at least in part, to choose to pray. I do know that to choose life as a people means that most if not all of us must make that decision. That is, we must decide to choose life.

As a congregation in search for a new pastor, we are a people who must decide, to choose life today, and tomorrow, and as often as necessary. We can implement that choice by learning to pray. Notice I did not say, "learning about prayer," but "learning to pray."

Prayer, my friends, is the foundation of spiritual health.

Prayer is not a part of the foundation.

Prayer is not the north wall of the foundation.

Prayer is not the mortar that holds the bricks of the foundation together.

Prayer is the foundation of spiritual health.

To choose to pray is to choose life.

During lent, beginning just a few weeks from now, I invite anyone

who is free on Tuesday afternoons to choose life by coming here and being part of A Walk and A Prayer. We'll have some conversation, then we'll go out and walk for awhile, to see what we see, and allow whatever we see to lead us into prayer. Choose life. Choose to come here, Tuesdays, beginning March 11th at 1.

Choose life, by choosing to pray. Don't wait for Lent. Here is an exercise for all of us. Look around this room. See who is here. See a spot where someone you know usually sits, someone who is not here today. Pray God's blessing upon those who are not here at this moment.

Now, look around again and choose 2 people. One that you hardly know, and another that you know really well. Choose life by Choosing to pray for these two people each and every day this week. Simply pray God's blessing upon them. Minutiae God's blessing as a lovely soft flannel shirt or a soft fleece blanket. Imagine how it feels to be surrounded by warm soft fabric. Pray God's blessing upon your two people two times a day for this next week. I promise to send a prayer reminder once a day for this week.

[If you are reading this sermon because it arrives in your mailbox each week, choose life by doing this prayer exercise a little differently. Choose two people in your life, one who you know well and one you hardly know at all, but you see with some regularity - someone you meet in the hall, or the crossing guard, or the mailcarrier who delivers your mail. Pray God's blessing on your two people two times a day for this week.]

Friends, I've spoken about choosing life specifically in the context of prayer but in reality, we choose between life and death in all the minutiae of our lives, every time we visit the grocery store, drive the car, chat on the phone or by social media. We make a thousand and one choices as we go through our days. Listen to these words of Moses, heed them well, and let them guide all our choices and decisions.

Choosing life is not so much a "once and done" decision. Choosing

life is a way of life, a way of covenant living that constantly seeks God and God's ways for a life that is filled with purpose, hope, joy, no matter comes to us. Remember as Moses and the people stood at the bank of the River Jordan, Moses called upon the people to choose life that they might live. Let us, as we stand at the beginning of a new journey for First Church, choose life, let us pray in some new way, that we too might live.