

## ***Pathways for Growth***

Sunday, February 12, 2023

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians

by Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20, a section of Moses' final sermon to Israel, offers an invitation to follow in the life-giving pathways of relationship with God.*

I don't want to brag, but I will. Carol Keating and I had the wonderful opportunity to spend four days with our grand-daughters last weekend. We enjoyed watching our now 7-year old granddaughter Mia celebrate her birthday with friends and family, and stayed with 16-month old grand-daughter, Jax, as her parents were able to get a weekend away. We drove home early Tuesday morning and have pretty much slept the entire week – but we did so with smiles on our faces and giggles in our hearts.

I have to say that perhaps the best part was getting a phone call from our daughter Katie yesterday thanking us, a bit sarcastically, for introducing Jax to the wonders of those grocery carts that are kid-sized cars. Apparently, my trip to the store with Jax made such an impression on her that she now feels cheated if her mother does not make the right choice at the grocery store.

Children teach us lesson. One is the reminder that parenting is a both a gift and a blessing – a task that is monumental, exhausting, but also rewarding and beautiful. Another is that there is actually little difference between small children and adults. What we've learned is that with the kids we sing songs like "Head, and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes." The songs our friends sing are pretty similar. They go something like, "Head and shoulders, knees and hips, knees and hips."

Perhaps we'll leave the other comparisons unmentioned.

But there's something else. What children may lack in life experiences, they more than make up for with actions. Children carry the inexhaustible energy of the young, which often manifests itself as that incredible impulse to explore the world, ready to discover.

Of course, some of these discoveries will bring blessings and joy, while others, sadly, will be more difficult or even painful. Children remind us of what this sermon in Deuteronomy is trying to convey to the people of Israel: traveling life's pathways always involves choices.

Deuteronomy upholds a vision of the life of faith as a pathway of grace. In Hebrew, its title is taken from its opening verse: “These are the words.” These are the words of grace and life, the words which will shape your identity as people of God.

It is easy to read through Deuteronomy, with all of its blessings and curses, its commands and laws, and to see it as nothing more than a book of legalistic ultimatums. And while it certainly includes words of Torah, of instruction in the law, scholar Ronald Clements reminds us that they are combined with the assertion of God’s love and grace—and infused with reminders that allowing that love to be manifest in our lives is the only way to let God’s love become effective and real in our world.<sup>1</sup>

That is the impulse Moses sets before us today in these words long considered to be his final sermon. While Moses may have complained to God about not being an effective speaker, it seems that he had a lot to say. In fact, much of Deuteronomy takes on the form of a sermon. Here Moses’ words bear witness to God’s words, and become an invitation to Israel.

The choice, Moses makes clear, is one of being blessed or being cursed. Imagine Moses, standing not on the mountain but on the 50 yard line of life, spelling out the final rules of the game before the coin toss. “If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.” Do this, and you shall live.

It’s not unlike the speech all parents give to their kids when they are being left home by themselves for the first time. Moses reminds them of the things God has done for them in the past, reiterating the history of all that God has done. The covenant looks toward the past, but also attends to the present: this is what God shall do for you. And finally, Moses’ words directs Israel to the hope of what God shall do in the future.

But the scripture is also quite clear: While God’s faithfulness has been steady, Israel has yet to be able to live up to what God expects. The hope is that they will one day grow up. Or, as Paul puts it, they will someday be able to move away from baby cereal to the hearty meat and potatoes of life in faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Clements, “Deuteronomy,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. II, p. 346.

It is, as the character Andy Dufresne says in the classic movie, “The Shawshank Redemption,” a reminder that the choices of life come down to one: “Get busy living or get busy dying.”

Centuries early, Moses pleads with Israel to do the same, his voice crescendos like a wave crashing on shore, spelling out the alternatives: choose life. After all, it is not a commandment which Moses believes is too hard. It’s not far-fetched. “This commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away...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...”

Choose life. For some, the phrase calls to mind certain political rallying cries. For others, it is a simplistic, mushy inspirational quote from a motivational poster. You know, the ones that show cute pictures of cats hanging on for dear life. As the cat claws the edge of a counter, the caption reads, “Choose life!”

For some, “choose life” means you only live once, so you better pack the trunk as full as you can. Eat, drink, and be merry—especially on Super Bowl Sunday when Americans will consume more than a million pounds of avocados, more than 14,000 tons of chips, which is about the equivalent of 34 fully loaded jumbo jets, and we will buy more than a billion dollars worth of chicken wings.<sup>2</sup> In other words, you may choose life, but you might also want to pick up Gaviscon.

Why, not? You only live once!

But for Moses, choosing life is not a call to be blessed with material goods. Rather, choosing life is a lifelong journey of growing in faith. In an old book, Methodist Bishop Will Willimon reminds preachers that the key to preaching is not so much highlighting people’s weaknesses, but instead is alerting them to pathways of lifelong growth. “Many persons of strength who have been successful in earning the material things of life,” writes Willimon, “assume that work must be the way to achieve the spiritual things as well. But the message of Christ is good news about a status which we already have with God, which we don’t need to “earn” and can’t work for.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ktvu.com/news/super-bowl-food-racks-up-super-tonnage>

<sup>3</sup> Willimon, *The Gospel for the Person who have Everything*, p. 46.

Israel repeats these words century after century. In a time when the candle of faith seemed to be particularly dim, Moses' words are repeated. Scholars believe this portion of Deuteronomy was likely written at the time when Israel's world had collapsed. In the chaos of the Babylonian exile, they were called once more to remember what is truly life giving and life sustaining.

Faith is a matter of participating in the new life God is offering us – growing, as Paul says, from gumming down baby food into a full course meal of grace and joy. “Our religion will be unprofitable,” wrote John Calvin, “if it does not change our heart, pervade our manners, and transform us into new creatures.”

There may be some remarkable moments in tonight's Super Bowl. To me, however, the most memorable play of this football season happened in the playoffs when Damar Hamill suffered a cardiac arrest and nearly died. In the struggle to rescue Hamill, teams and cities put aside their team loyalties to focus on him. Advanced life support was rushed to the field, and Hamill was sent almost immediately to one of the best medical centers in the country. On Friday, during the NFL awards, Hamill was recognized, but then turned to thank all of the medical providers and personnel who had helped. He said, simply, “The journey continues.

Yes, indeed. That is our good news: the journey continues—even when it looks as though the way ahead is uncertain or even painful. The journey continues—even when we do not know exactly how we will get there. The journey continues—moving us from the pablum of baby food to the meat and potatoes of the gospel, so that as we choose life we are drawn closer into relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**