

RE-CHOOSING

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Text: Deuteronomy 30:11–14

The book of Deuteronomy is the last book of the Torah. It is the book of God's laws, decrees, and ordinances and includes sermons, speeches, and a farewell address attributed to Moses. Scholars agree that the form of the book we have before us was not contemporaneous with Moses and the exodus from Egypt but composed at the end of the Babylonian exile, when Israel was poised to return to the land of promise. Wherever we place it, its theological thrust, its profound exploration of hope found in a living faith, is undeniable. Whether we read this text as a literary portrayal of God's liberated people leaving Mt. Horeb in possession of God's gift of the Ten Commandments on their way to the promised land or narrative sermons of hope composed to encourage the exiled community on the cusp of their return from being scattered to the far ends of the earth, those to whom God pledged covenant loyalty are on the verge of lapsing into futility and hopelessness, despairing their ability to get it right this time. They face critical, existential questions: Can we be faithful? Can we obey God's word this time after failing at it so many times before?

And these aren't theoretical questions. This isn't a simple matter of nervousness and uncertainty of generations of people far removed from their religious ancestral homeland. This goes to the core of what it means for them to be alive and to have a future. Israel has failed God. Israel has been faithless and disloyal. And they know the consequences of disobedience. When Israel forgot God, when her frame of reference was anything other than God, Israel's fortunes faltered, and the people lost their land, Temple, and nation. The judgment for failure to be faithful to God has been stark and uncompromising: destruction, barrenness, futility, exile.

So with the promise of return, including repentance, restoration, gathering, and a possible future, with God once again showing unconditional love and grace toward a people who have let God down time and again, it is not surprising for the people to pause and consider, "Can we do this? Can it be different from before?" They knew well God's decrees and commandments. They were instructed to keep God's words in their hearts, recite them to their children, and talk about them wherever they went. They disobeyed and lost everything. What's to say it won't be like that again?

The Deuteronomistic historians who compiled this work find the answer to Israel's despair, confusion, and trepidation about how to return in the words of Moses. Moses's message is, "You can do it." Despite trials, wilderness wanderings, and the experience of exile, "You can do it." Now I hope we don't hear that phrase the way our therapeutic culture and self-help industry proclaim it. It's not Moses' way of telling them to "buck up." It's not about having a positive attitude. It is a call to recall what it means to be in covenant with God and love God with all their hearts, souls, and might. Moses knew it would be difficult to be faithful in a world with more accommodating gods and religions, powerful political alliances with stronger nations, and imperial abundance and prosperity. He knew that being covenant partners with God and enjoying all the benefits of God's covenant loyalty had the potential to breed complacency and self-justification. He

knew that they would be tempted to compromise on their commitments for the sake of comfort, expediency, and business as usual.

But you can do it. You do not have to go the way of disobedience and exile again. It is a reminder that God's decrees and commandments are a gift that is always theirs for the taking. It's not too wondrous or remote, not hidden behind an impenetrable mystery for only the chosen or the holiest, not an unreachable ideal that will be understood only at the end of time. It's not too difficult to be obedient to God's commands. It doesn't require an extra measure of faith or a herculean demonstration of strength to achieve. God's commands, decrees, and ordinances are gifts of life. Choose them. Re-choose them. And choose them again. The ancestors had exhorted them to memorize it, recite it, internalize it, appropriate it. Moses described it as circumcising the heart. Israel knows exactly what is required of them to be faithful to the covenant with God. They must re-choose it even when it is easier not to. They must choose it even if it means letting go of the lesser gods of money, possessions, and status.

We live in an age where the church's future as we know it is in question. Public opinion surveys reveal a growing number of people concluding that church and faith are not relevant to their lives. Even the faithful experience bouts of despair and futility, wrestling with doubts about whether the traditions we have received can meet the challenges we face. Many wonder if our faith can make a difference in light of the disillusionment of the human condition. When it seems that the lesser gods of money, possessions, and status do a better job of soothing our doubts and calming our fears than the gracious God who is present with us, we have to wonder if we can follow in the way of God. The safer, less disorienting choice is to stay the course. Don't make any sudden moves. Double down on the rules and traditions even if they don't seem to be addressing our deepest hurts and concerns.

Our doubt, confusion, and trepidation are not unfounded. But Moses preaches to us even now. We can be faithful. We can live justly. We can choose what is good and right and just. We can do it. The antidote to the despair and futility we feel and fear is faith—a faith found not in just memorizing and reciting what God requires and commands of us but also found in internalizing it and appropriating it such that we live and make life possible for others. We can be courageous enough to choose what is good, the just, the right; over and over again, choosing to honor what is right; re-choosing when we have faltered, forgotten or forsaken the call to love, serve, and do justice. Every time God's promise of repentance, restoration, gathering, and a possible future is on offer, we choose to go all-in with God to do justice and show mercy and kindness.

I'm talking about a covenant faith that stands above the vagaries of a culture awash in choice, wealth, and self-absorption. I'm talking about a trust in God's commandments when our religions, denominations, politics, and ideologies offer us cheap grace and shortcuts to greatness, abundance, and personal salvation. I'm talking about choosing justice when the status quo provides comfort and expedience. And this isn't theoretical, and it's not just about private faith. Moses' exhortation to Israel to observe God's ways is an invitation to a public theology, a public choice, that bears witness to the world that their lesser gods, their injustice, and their exploitation are the ways of death. The way of life is found in loving God and neighbor with all our heart, soul, and might. This is the choice with which we are confronted.

And this is an all-encompassing choice that touches on how we live in this world right now. As we worship safely in this sanctuary and our homes, we are surrounded by death: community violence that robs our children of life, and state violence in which police kill innocent citizens. Well-meaning people keep asking if the answer is unknowable or unreachable: Can we do something about it? Are we resigned to despair and futility because we've failed so far? Moses' message is for us. We can do something about it. We can choose to do justice. It is a gift for the taking.

The answer to community and police violence has something to do with internalizing and appropriating God's command to love God and our neighbor. It's not too wondrous or remote, not hidden behind an

impenetrable mystery for only the chosen or the holiest or the wealthiest, not an unreachable ideal that will be understood at the end of time. It's not too difficult to do right by those who need life, health, housing, and opportunity. We are good at memorizing and reciting sacred texts and the great creeds of our nation, but we have yet to internalize and appropriate them for the most vulnerable among us. We keep holding on to death when we are gifted life, invited to choose life. We can do it. Faced with unlimited choice, we appeal to something bigger than our status, nationality, politics, or ideologies. When love, justice, and service conflict with what is most comfortable, conventional, or imperial, we choose to love. Re-choose it. Choose God and good. Let the covenant we pledge to God be the face of our constitution and our congregation.