

Standalone Weekend: Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

"Choices"

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Digging Deeper

Standalone Weekend: "Choices"

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37; others throughout.

Introduction

Our study this week uses texts taken from the list of readings in the *Revised Common Lectionary*, Scriptures read in churches throughout the world during this weekend. We didn't choose these texts; they chose us! On the liturgical calendar which guides the choice of these readings for worship, this weekend is the sixth Sunday after *Epiphany* (January 6th)¹, a feast celebrating the arrival of the Magi who followed the stellar light of the Christ-child's birth. The Church historically sees this light as shining on all the nations who, like the Magi, are drawn to its radiance and to the gospel which it proclaims. Like ordinary light radiating out into the universe from a fixed point, the light of Jesus continues to move outward into the darkness of a world captive to sin, fearful of death, and paralyzed by despair. Light offers hope for humanity's future, and so the Church devotes several weeks after Epiphany to meditate on its meaning and purpose for the days which lie ahead.

The emphasis of these texts for this week after Epiphany is on the theme of "choices," those often difficult decisions we make that have consequential outcomes affecting the most essential aspects of our human existence. Making decisions requires awareness of everything that is at stake for us before foreclosing on a single choice. Appropriately, the liturgy of Epiphany provides the light for enlightenment in the decision-making process. Christians and the Church surrounding them live daily by this light through practices that make choices possible. These practices include the Word, prayer, worship, fellowship, service, and sacrament. We study the lectionary texts for this weekend because they are "a lamp to our feet and a light to our path" (Psalm 119:9-11).

Human beings are defined by choice. Human beings imagine the world other than it is and then choose to make it that way. Human beings experience the consequences of their choices, whether good or bad. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard titled one of his books, *Either/Or*. In it he wrote,

I shout it to you: Either/Or...These words have always made a great impression on me and still do, especially when I say them this way plainly and by themselves; there lies the possibility of setting in motion the most terrifying contradictions. They act upon me like an incantation formula, and my soul becomes exceedingly earnest, at times is almost in a state of shock. ... I think of moments later in life when I stood at the crossroads, when my soul was made ripe in the hour of decision. ... there is only one situation in which these words have absolute meaning — namely, every time truth, justice, and sanctity appear on one side and lust and natural inclinations, dark passions and perdition on the other side. ... what a person chooses is always important. It is important that he choose properly, test himself, so that eventually he does not have to begin a painful retreat to the point where he started and thank God if he has no more for which to upbraid himself than having wasted his time.

... The choice itself is itself crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy...

Imagine a captain of a ship the moment a shift in direction must be made; then he may be able to say: I can do either this or that. But if he is not a mediocre captain he will also be aware that during all this the ship is ploughing ahead with its ordinary velocity, and thus there is but a single moment when it is inconsequential whether he does this or

¹ The word *Epiphany* comes from the Greek term, meaning "to shine on, illuminate with bright light."

does that. So also with a person — if he forgets to take into account the velocity — there eventually comes a moment where it is no longer a matter of an Either/Or, not because he has chosen, but because he has refrained from it, which also can be expressed by saying: Because others have chosen for him — or because he has lost himself.²

Christian folk are moral agents capable of deciding for this direction, that result, these purposes, and those goods. With moral agency comes responsibility that bears the burden for good or bad choices. The good news is that none of us need to bear that burden alone, for we are “members, one of another” in the body of Christ, bound together by the saving work of Jesus, the sanctifying ministry of the Spirit, and the supreme love of the Father. From the heart of the Triune God there shines forth the wisdom of eternity: to guide and order our steps and to empower our hearts to choose rightly.

Four texts, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament, give us light this week in this all-important work of right decisions. As you follow the study, be thinking about the decisions you will face during the year ahead and then ask the Lord of all wisdom to use His Word to shape how you choose.

Life and Death Choices (Deuteronomy 30:15 - 20)

15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. 16 For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18 I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deuteronomy 30:15 - 20).

Moses would soon die, and Israel would need to move on. After all, there’s life after Moses! But will there be life after Moses for Israel? That is the weighted question pressing all sides of our reading from Deuteronomy 30:15-20. There is urgency to the whole matter of what Israel will do after Moses dies. Four times in the text we hear the urgent word, “Today” or “this day” (15, 16, 18, 19). And what is *this day* supposed to mean for Israel? *God* is doing something *today* which requires that *we* do something *today*. He sets before us a very serious *either/or*, one which places us at the very *spear-tip of choice*, to borrow more words from Kierkegaard. Life or death, prosperity or destruction, blessings or curses — these are all “set before” us, the writer says.

In the end it must be, after all, *our choice*. If we fail to choose, there are plenty of “other gods” who are more than willing to *choose for us* (17). In *not* choosing, we choose. Parents who won’t teach their children about God or life or death on the grounds that they want to leave it up to them to choose when they become old enough to do so, fool themselves and do great injustice to their children. Parents must teach their children about such things because pressing around the edges of their children’s lives are plenty of other teachers ready and willing to teach them. Those other teachers will not wait until the children are grown. They will teach through powerful media images and imaginative cartoon characters and the playtimes with their friends. No child is neutral in those early years. Even children start choosing when choice is placed before them.

We are not left alone in this choice, however. The Deuteronomist says plainly, “For the Lord (Yahweh) is your life, and he will give...” (20). He gives us a promise, and we live on the basis of this promise, and we act on the basis of this promise. Choosing isn’t a matter of grasping; it’s a matter of receiving this promise from the hand of God. He makes it plain to us, “You will not be destroyed...” or “You will be destroyed...” He tells us this even before we choose: not to remove the need for our choice, but to assure us that He always remains with us when we choose.

² *Either/Or*, vol. II, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 157-158, 163-164.

This choice requires much from us. We are to “love the Lord, walk in his ways, keep his commands/decrees/laws (16). Doing so carries a blessing — a blessing which comes from the promise: “You will live and increase. But it is also possible for us to choose poorly and be destroyed and lose the land.

Our choice can never be entirely private. God calls heaven and earth as witnesses (19). He calls us publically and asks us to take a public stand in our choice. And when we do, we join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who made choices before us and who received God’s promise before us and knew God’s blessing before us. However, our choice can never be entirely public. It is “our heart” (17) which either turns to God or it is “our heart” which turns away from God. This choice is not a matter of impressing others with an outward display. This choice must be made deep within the sanctuary our heart where all serious decisions are made.

Blessed by Informed Choices (Psalm 119:1-8)

Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. 2 Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. 3 They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways. 4 You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. 5 Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees! 6 Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands. 7 I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws. 8 I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me (Psalm 119:1-8).

The psalmist affirms this in Psalm 119:1-8. He tells us that human beings can truly be blessed, but that this blessing is not to be taken for granted. It comes from blameless ways and faithful walking and good obedience. But above all, it comes from “seeking” God “with all [your] heart” (2). It comes from “praising” God “with an upright heart” (7). The word “upright” in Hebrew is *yashar* and it means to “be straight.” We might say, “Be a straight shooter” or “a stand-up kind of guy.” When applied to the road we travel, it means “even” — free of potholes! How we choose sends a message to those who follow us *on the road of life*.

Good poets, like the psalm-writer, commonly enrich their lyrics with many synonyms in order to unpack the meaning of a single idea. The text above is no exception since the focus is on the crucial source for decisions, namely, “the law of Yahweh.” *Law* is a deceptively easy word, by which we mean that it’s quite easy to assume law means *rules* and *only* means *rules*. In the deep Jewish tradition, law is *Torah*, a Hebrew word referring to “guidance, direction, and instruction.” If the Law has anything to do with rules, they come in the form of training and spiritual nurture. God is Father to His people, and He responsibly helps them learn the way they should go through instructions for guidance and direction. When they decide to *follow* His Torah, their lives flourish as human beings made in His image. Should they refuse His instruction, they will wander aimlessly guided only by short-sighted purposes toward fuzzy goals away from the right path. The God of His people wants them to find the right path and then to remain on that path until they arrive at the goods He has in store for them.

Another poetic variation on Law is the word *statutes*. The term comes from the Hebrew *huqqim* used 21 times in Psalm 119. The noun is derived from the root verb “engrave” or “inscribe”; the idea is of the written word of God and the authority of His written word. “Declaring his authority and power of giving us laws” (Poole). The light we need to make right choices shines from the witnesses who speak in the books we collectively call “the Bible.” Unwilling to leave humanity without a *written witness*, God our Father speaks to us through God the Son through inspired texts from God the Spirit. Reading and studying the written words of the Bible within the community called the Church *illuminates* old texts with fresh meaning, shedding light on the hard choices facing us every day. The practice of faithfully turning our eyes to the book of God inscribes light-bearing words on our hearts which imprint the will of God on our characters. No choice is ever made in a vacuum or left to mere experience or to conventional wisdom. “My mom used to say” only gets us so far; “common sense” isn’t always right; “it’s on the Internet” hardly means the gospel truth; rap sessions over a pitcher of beer don’t guarantee good advice; motivational speakers have no monopoly on wise counsel; talking heads or talk shows are not the last word! In the wisdom of God, He arranged for reliable witnesses to His words and deeds to leave the imprint engraved in written form so that we might access a firm foundation for moral reasoning and

sound decision-making. That written testimony in the Bible is a *statute* because it “*stands* the test of time” and yet is fully available to us as God’s light and life for the journey we are taking.

Precepts is another variation of Torah. The word comes from the Hebrew *piqqudim*, used 21 times: “This is a word drawn from the sphere of an officer or overseer, and man who is responsible to look closely into a situation and take action. . . . So the word points to the particular instructions of the Lord, as of one who cares about detail” (Kidner). “The devil is in the details” is a familiar proverb attributed to several sources including an architect and also an artist. Ironically, its earliest origin had a different form: “The good God is in the details,” a version more affable to our purposes here! God has without doubt given human beings considerable freedom to work out the details of their lives in the world since, after all, He wants them to grow and mature in His image and likeness. That said, God also *cares* about the details because it matters to Him how His great purposes take shape in human lives. Does God *micromanage*? Not always, but sometimes He has no other choice given the limited wisdom of His human creatures to see everything at once as He does. “Big picture” perspective does not obliterate “small pixel” detail, however. The psalmist says that God wants His precepts to be “fully obeyed,” and thereby intends that the reader not deal in broad generalities, but in blessed details. “Little is much when God is in it” The prophet Isaiah once wrote:

"A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. I the LORD, will hasten it in its time".
Isaiah 60:22

Jesus reminded his followers that the heavenly Father cares about the fall of a tiny sparrow and also about the hairs on our head! (Matthew 10:29-31). “The day of small things” is important to God (Zechariah 4:10). *Precepts* preserve the details in the midst of the gargantuan. Our choices depend on getting the details right, and the Lord’s precepts from His Word supply them for us when we need them. Every decision we make is a cluster of many smaller atoms of detail that inform how we choose.

God’s *decrees* also shape our decisions. The Hebrew word used by the poet is *hiqāh* and comes from a verb which means “to prescribe, enact, make due.” It is a strong word that supplies definite boundaries for practices and behavior. The Father of His people provides safe limits for human actions and enacts boundaries for healthy conduct. He “prescribes” much in the fashion of a physician might recommend restrictions on food or prescribe medication or authorize procedures. God has the best welfare in mind for His children, and then lays out a wellness plan for their spiritual health. Our decisions should be guided by His restrictions and resources for our flourishing. Having reasonable limits encourages discipline, good habits, and the best outcomes. Following these when we choose this course of action or that vocation or these best practices or those companions will lead to what the poet calls “the *blessed*” life. Choices of this kind are “steadfast” and thus reliable; “without shame” and thus honorable; “upright” and thus life-changing; “obedient” and thus approved by our Father who cares for us.

Spirit-Led Choices (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? 4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? 5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building (1 Corinthians 3:1-9).

Paul’s audience in Corinth was a mixed group. We see this in the epistle reading (1 Corinthians 3:1-9). Some people recognized the moment of choice and they decided to whole heartedly follow Jesus Christ. Paul calls them “spiritual,” although a better translation expands the sense of the Greek word *pneumatikoi*: “people who live by the Spirit.” When they choose, they pay attention to what the Spirit is saying to them *in their hearts* through the words they hear from Sacred Scripture, as well as from the mutterings deep *inside their souls*. When they read a text or hear a sermon they ask themselves, “What is the Spirit saying to me?” They aren’t all starry-eyed over the speaker or awed by his oratory or captivated by his wisdom. They are listening for the

Word of God among the words of texts and sermons and lessons and devotions. They listen because they want to choose wisely — choose by the Spirit.

Not everybody in Corinth chose this way. They weren't all people who lived by the Spirit. A second group appears in the same reading. Our translations call them "worldly." The Greek word is *sarkinos* and is based on the more fundamental term *sarx*, usually rendered as "flesh" — a reference to the finite, frail stuff of which we are made and through which we naturally want to define who we are. It's not just about our bodies — that word is *soma* — but about our whole selves in their alienation from God and in their thorough selfishness. Paul moves to a fresh image when he defines such persons as "infants in Christ" (1) who only want to drink milk and who cannot handle solid food (2). The reason: they are not "ready for it" or as the Greek has it are not "able" to take it. Such persons are, Paul says, "mere men" (4). Again the Greek here is enlightening. Paul simply uses the word *anthropoi* to refer to ordinary human beings who are just like everybody else. There is nothing especially unique about them. They don't stand out in anyway special. They simply blend in with the crowd — with the herd — unremarkable in every way.

Why of course they are just ordinary human beings. They haven't made any choices to be otherwise. They have allowed what I call a *moral inertia* to control them. Remember *inertia*? — objects at rest, stay at rest; objects in motion, stay in motion. But of course, having not chosen, they allow other people to choose for them. Or, they allowed themselves to be awed by the splendid abilities of other people, and become so many religious groupies who hang on every word, but wouldn't imagine thinking for themselves. They are not just *milk* fed: they are *spoon* fed. They simply play back what they hear others say, but they never really choose for themselves. They are Paul people. They are Apollos people. Refer back to the previous chapter. They are average people — *mere humans*.

But God doesn't want groupies. He wants servants — persons who will choose to devote themselves fully in His service (5). He wants persons "through whom" others may come to believe (6). He wants persons with a distinctive sense of what they are here for; persons who know who they are; persons who do what they are equipped by the Spirit to do best : planters and waterers (7-8). They are persons who see themselves as "God's fellow workers" — who share with God in His work, in His field, and in his building (9). They are persons whose reward is uniquely fitted to their work, not to somebody else's work.

The chosen people are the people who choose to be chosen; the call to be God's peculiar people who refuse to barter away their peculiarity; people who choose to cultivate their special uniqueness by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Choices beyond the Words to their Deeper Meaning (Matthew 5:21-37)

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. 23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. 25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' 34 But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the

earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matthew 5:21-37).

The message of Jesus was thick with the invitation to be the peculiar, chosen people who choose to be that way! In Matthew 5:21-37 — today's Gospel reading — Jesus leads off with some key words: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago” (21). In those words there's a lot about the past; there's a lot about hearing about the past; there's a lot about the past “long ago...” Jesus imagines an audience who sit at the dinner table eating food that's 1,000 years old. Who would choose to do that, for goodness sake? Here are passive people who with mindless repetition, say their little creeds, mumble their prayers, and even listen to the old, old texts from their Bibles, but who don't allow any of this to stimulate their present imagination. They are happy with milk, but haven't eaten meat.

For example, Jesus tells them, they hear the words “Do not kill” — that would be one of the Big Ten from Exodus 20!. They take it at face value; they don't interpret it; they don't think about its implications; they don't ask questions about it; it's simply an article of faith. They assume that if they don't take another human being's life in a premeditated fashion, they are good to go with God. Only people who murder need worry about judgment. We usually call words like this one of the “Ten Commandments.” Curiously, the Hebrew Bible calls them the “Ten *Words*” (*'esereth had'barim*, Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4) — ten *spoken* words, ten *living, oral* words from the mouth of God. Words like that can never be taken at face value. Words like that can hardly mean only one thing. Jesus challenges his audience to engage in an act of imagination to think about those words in fresh ways. Choose to think about those words as having meanings much beyond their literal sense.

Jesus imagines the words “do not kill” to mean “manage your anger.” Jesus imagines the words “do not kill” to mean “don't ridicule your brother.” Jesus imagines the words “do not kill” to mean “don't write off your brother by marginalizing him.” Jesus imagines the words “do not kill” to be a call for potential litigants in costly lawsuits “to settle their disputes before they get to court.” So serious is Jesus about unpacking these simple words, he invites people to forego their normal acts of sacrifice in the Temple and reconcile with each other first. In the same way, Jesus examines the ancient words about adultery and oath-taking (that's your homework assignment!).

Just because we regard the words of the Bible as ancient and familiar doesn't mean we have come to terms with them; it doesn't mean we have chosen to hear in them the Word of God for today. Jesus spoke the ancient words as words rolling off the lips of God today. The Bible wasn't supposed to be a monument to the wisdom of the past. The Bible is the faithful witness to the Word of God. But we must choose to hear it anew. We must choose to receive its words today. And we must be willing to commit an act of imagination from our hearts to do so.

Conclusion

Remember the words of Deuteronomy: “I declare to you this day...” (30:18). “Today I set before you life...” (30:15). “Today, love the Lord your God...” (30:16). “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses” (30:19). Listen carefully from your hearts to this last statement. Imagine Moses and Israel standing under the sky of heaven with its sun, moon and stars, and with its blue atmosphere. Imagine Moses and Israel standing on the orb of the earth, their feet on its sandy ground. But Moses and Israel are now dead. It is you and I who stand under the sky of heaven with our feet on the ground. We are still alive. Imagine this: the sky is the same sky; the sun, moon, stars and atmosphere are the same witnesses today as they were then. Imagine heaven and earth watching us and saying, What will these people choose? How will they decide? Where will they go? Whose people will they become? God has made heaven and earth witnesses of us — today — in our time. We are at the spear-tip of choice; we must decide. When we decide, Jesus gives us fresh words to speak: “Let your “Yes” be “Yes” and your “No” “No.” Make up your mind. Choose life. Choose the Lord who is your life.

To God Be the Glory! Amen!