

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

A CHOICE OF LIFE AND DEATH

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)

Analysis by Peter Keyel

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Our Choice Is Fatal

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Obedience

God is giving the Israelites a choice here. Serve God and prosper, or reject him and die. Some focus on whether God is doing the rewarding and/or punishing, while others might point

out that God is simply telling it like it is (if you stick your hand in a fire, then it will get burned). Either way, the exhortation is clear: love God, walk in God's ways, and observe every last commandment, decree, and ordinance. If you manage this, there is a reward waiting.

So why did the Israelites turn away repeatedly? Why do we have a hard time with obedience?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Hearts Turn Away
The first clue here is the need for a command at all. If all the Israelites knew was God, if they did love God with their whole heart, there would be no space for evil. There would be no need for a command. Instead, their hearts continually turn away from God, spurning the choice. Whether they want no part of a vengeful God, disagree that the commands are good or wholesome, or try their hardest and simply fail to keep every single commandment all of the time, the Israelites' hearts are not good enough.

We know the Israelites' story, though. They would fall away, but return and try harder the next time. God's forgiveness means that if we just try a little harder each time, we can steadily make ourselves holier and get a little closer to heaven each day, right?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Law of Life and Death

God does not seem interested in half-measures, or partial success. The Israelites' hearts turn away because they are in rebellion against God. No matter how well justified or understandable that rebellion is, it remains rebellion. And God sets the penalty for failure quite high: "if your heart turns away ...I declare to you today that you shall perish" (vv. 17-18).

That was the end to the Israelites' dominion of the lands: they

did not live long in the lands they crossed the Jordan to come and possess. Trying harder didn't make them holy enough to avoid death.

PROGNOSIS: God's Choice Brings Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Gift of Death and Life

Long after the Israelites' reign in the lands across the Jordan came to an end, these stories were passed down, possibly still with the interpretation of "only try hard enough and you will be rewarded." None succeeded until one man, Jesus of Nazareth. This man chose to love God and walk in the ways of God. However, this man also made common cause with the sinners who deserved death for rebelling against God. His cause with them was so great, he died with them.

That upsets the whole apple cart of rewards and punishments as well as "try hard enough and you will be rewarded." Jesus died young, in pain and forsaken. Where was his reward?

And then death broke: Jesus lived again. When Jesus rose, he made the choice for those sinners, too: He chose life for them, so that they and their descendants would live.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Hearts Held Fast
Trusting that Jesus has made this choice for us is faith. That faith holds our hearts tightly. When filled with faith there is no room for evil and we no longer need worry about spurning the choice God offers us. Jesus has already made it. Forgiveness is not another chance to become holier, but our hearts being held tight in God's grasp despite our sins.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Blessed
God's grasp on our hearts leads to something else, something new in our lives. Instead of obedience to commands, we see God's

promise to bless us come to fruition. This blessing is not obedience to a command, but it is the consequence of God holding our hearts and our finally being in the right place with God. From this place of being held by God, we are freed from the system of rewards and punishments. We may live or die to be blessings to others.