

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
February 13, '11

“CHOICES & CHANCES”

I HAVE ALWAYS HAD AN AVERSION TO THE PROLIFERATION OF CHOICES THAT FACE US EACH DAY.

I WORK DILIGENTLY TO MINIMIZE THOSE CHOICES.

I THINK THIS MAY STEM FROM A CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE WHEN MY AUNT CARMEN DID SOMETHING VERY UNCHARACTERISTIC OF HER.

SHE DROVE MY SISTER & ME TO THE HOWARD JOHNSON'S IN GROSSE POINTE, MICHIGAN – A PLACE WE'D HEARD OF BUT NEVER VISITED.

HOWARD JOHNSON'S BOASTED OF SOMETHING BEYOND A CHILD'S WILDEST DREAMS – 28 FLAVORS OF ICE CREAM!

THIS WAS, OF COURSE, IN THE PRE-BASKIN-ROBBINS 31 FLAVORS DAYS.

I LOOKED AT THE BIG BOARD OF OPTIONS & FELT MY KNEES SHAKE.

AFTER AUNT CARMEN & DEE DEE HAD MADE THEIR DECISIONS & WERE ALREADY LAPPING AWAY AT THEIR CONES, I FINALLY GAVE UP & MUTTERED, “I’LL TAKE VANILLA.”

MY AUNT WAS FURIOUS!

*“WE COULD HAVE GONE TO THE CORNER DRUG STORE & GOTTEN VANILLA!”*

I HAVE BEEN CHOICE-CHALLENGED EVER SINCE!

MY AFFLICTION HAS BECOME MORE SERIOUS OVER THE YEARS BECAUSE CHOICES HAVE GROWN EXPONENTIALLY.

I REFUSE TO EAT AT SUBWAY BECAUSE YOU CAN'T JUST ORDER A SANDWICH – YOU HAVE TO MOVE DOWN THE LINE & TELL THEM EVERYTHING YOU WANT ON IT.

I'D LIKE TO BE ABLE TO WALK IN & SAY, “I’LL TAKE A SANDWICH” AND BE DONE WITH IT!

I'VE GONE TO STARBUCK'S ONCE A WEEK FOR THE PAST 5 YEARS OR SO.

EVERY WEEK I ORDER A DRINK.

THAT'S SOMEWHERE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF 200-250 DRINKS I HAVE PURCHASED AT STARBUCK'S.

EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THOSE DRINKS HAS BEEN THE SAME – SAME SIZE, SAME CONTENTS.

DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY OPTIONS THEY TELL ME I HAVE, THOUGH?

I TRIED TO FIGURE IT OUT BUT GAVE UP & THEN DISCOVERED THAT STARBUCKS HAS CALCULATED IT FOR ME.

THEY BOAST – AND WHY THEY WOULD WANT TO BOAST ABOUT THIS IS A MYSTERY TO ME – THAT THEY HAVE 87,000 OPTIONS WHEN CHOOSING A DRINK!

OUR LIVES ARE FILLED WITH OPTIONS – WITH DECISIONS – WITH CHOICES.

FORTUNATELY, MANY OF THOSE CHOICES ARE RELATIVELY INSIGNIFICANT.

ICE CREAM, SANDWICHES & DRINKS DON'T REALLY HAVE MUCH LASTING SIGNIFICANCE.

OTHER CHOICES, THOUGH, DO MATTER – SOME MATTER FOR ETERNITY.

IN THIS PASSAGE WE'VE READ FROM DEUTERONOMY, MOSES PRESENTS THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WITH SUCH A CHOICE.

AFTER 40 YEARS OF WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS, THEY STAND AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE PROMISED LAND.

THEY'RE CAMPED IN THE PLAINS OF MOAB, EAST OF THE JORDAN RIVER, PREPARING TO ENTER THE LAND OF CANAAN.

THEIR FAILURES OF THE PAST ARE BEHIND THEM IN THE DESERT & THE CHALLENGES OF A NEW FUTURE LIE BEFORE THEM ACROSS THE RIVER.

THEIR LEADER, MOSES, OFFERS THEM A CLEAR CHOICE.

HE TELLS THEM IT'S DECISION TIME.

HE GIVES THEM TWO OPTIONS – *"LIFE AND PROSPERITY OR DEATH & ADVERSITY."*

HE CHALLENGES THEM TO *"CHOOSE LIFE."*

IT APPEARS TO BE A NO-BRAINER, DOESN'T IT?

WHO WOULD BE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO CHOOSE DEATH & ADVERSITY OVER LIFE & PROSPERITY?

THOUGH IT DIDN'T HAPPEN TO ME, I HEARD ABOUT A MINISTER WHO WAS CONDUCTING A WEDDING & THE BRIDE WAS CONTEMPLATING THE QUESTION HE HAD JUST ASKED HER: *"WILL YOU TAKE THIS MAN FOR BETTER OR WORSE, RICHER OR POORER, IN SICKNESS OR HEALTH, 'TIL DEATH DO YOU PART?"*

AFTER A PAUSE, SHE SAID, *"I'LL TAKE BETTER, RICHER & HEALTH, PLEASE!"*

IF ONLY IT WERE THAT SIMPLE!

WHO WOULDN'T CHOOSE BETTER, RICHER & HEALTH OVER WORSE, POORER & SICKNESS?

WHO WOULDN'T TAKE LIFE & PROSPERITY OVER DEATH & ADVERSITY?

THE PROBLEM IS THAT CHOOSING LIFE & PROSPERITY MEANS FOLLOWING GOD.

IT MEANS OBEYING GOD'S COMMANDMENTS.

IT MEANS WALKING IN GOD'S WAYS.

IT MEANS – AS WE FOCUSED ON A FEW WEEKS AGO – DOING JUSTICE, LOVING KINDNESS & WALKING HUMBLY WITH GOD.

AT FIRST GLANCE, IT SOUNDS LIKE A VERY SIMPLE CHOICE – LIFE & PROSPERITY VERSUS DEATH & ADVERSITY.

I SUSPECT THAT IF ANY ONE OF US HAD BEEN STANDING THERE ON THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN AFTER WANDERING ABOUT FOR 40 YEARS, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN QUICK TO SHOUT OUR ASSENT – *"I'M WITH YOU, MOSES! I'M ALL FOR THIS LIFE & PROSPERITY THING. NOW LET'S GET ACROSS THAT RIVER!"*

BUT WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, I'M NOT SURE WE'RE REALLY READY TO TAKE THAT STEP INTO THE WATER.

DO WE REALLY KNOW WHAT WE'RE IN FOR WHEN WE MAKE A DECISION LIKE THIS – A DECISION TO CHOOSE LIFE – A DECISION TO FOLLOW GOD?

**WE MAY GET MORE THAN WE BARGAINED FOR.**

**I FIND IT VERY INTERESTING THAT THIS OLD TESTAMENT LECTIONARY READING FALLS ON THIS DAY.**

**WE'VE READ ABOUT A NATION THAT HAD BEEN ENSLAVED IN EGYPT FOR YEARS BY A TYRANNICAL RULER.**

**THEY LONGED FOR, THEY PRAYED FOR, THEY DREAMED OF FREEDOM.**

**AND NOW, THEY HAVE IT.**

**BUT WHAT WILL IT MEAN AS THEY LOOK TO THE FUTURE?**

**THE DECISION IS IN THEIR HANDS.**

**ISN'T THAT PRECISELY WHAT WE'VE WITNESSED THIS PAST WEEK?**

**A NATION HAS BEEN ENSLAVED IN EGYPT FOR YEARS BY A TYRANNICAL RULER.**

**THEY LONGED FOR, THEY PRAYED FOR, THEY DREAMED OF FREEDOM.**

**AND NOW, THEY HAVE IT.**

**BUT WHAT WILL IT MEAN AS THEY LOOK TO THE FUTURE?**

**THE DECISION IS IN THEIR HANDS.**

**WILL THE EGYPTIAN PEOPLE TODAY CHOOSE LIFE & PROSPERITY OR DEATH & ADVERSITY?**

**LIKE THE ISRAELITES AS THEY STOOD ON THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN, THE CHOICE IS THEIRS TO MAKE.**

**I THINK THERE ARE SOME INTERESTING PARALLELS IN OUR OWN NATION'S HISTORY.**

**TEN YEARS AFTER THE MAYFLOWER ARRIVED AT PLYMOUTH ROCK, ANOTHER SHIP, THE ARABELLA FOUND ITS WAY TO OUR SHORES.**

**THEIR LEADER & SPIRITUAL ADVISOR, JOHN WINTHROP, PREACHED ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS SERMONS IN ALL AMERICAN HISTORY.**

**JUST AS THEY WERE ABOUT TO LAND – WHILE THEY WERE STILL ON BOARD THE SHIP – WINTHROP WARNED THEM THAT THEY COULD SHIPWRECK ON THE ROCKS OFF THE SHORES OF MASSACHUSETTS.**

**BUT HE WAS EVEN MORE WORRIED ABOUT A SPIRITUAL SHIPWRECK IF THEY REFUSED TO PUT GOD FIRST IN ALL THEIR ENDEAVORS.**

**HE SAID, *“THE ONLY WAY TO AVOID THIS SHIPWRECK AND TO PROVIDE FOR OUR POSTERITY IS TO FOLLOW THE COUNSEL OF MICAH – TO DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS & WALK HUMBLY WITH OUR GOD. FOR THIS END, WE MUST BE KNIT TOGETHER IN THIS WORK AS ONE.***

***WE MUST ENTERTAIN EACH OTHER IN BROTHERLY AFFECTION.”***

**AND THEN WINTHROP SAID SOMETHING THAT, I'M AFRAID, HAS BEEN TOO OFTEN FORGOTTEN IN OUR NATION – *“WE MUST BE WILLING TO ABRIDGE OURSELVES OF OUR RICHES, FOR THE SUPPLY OF OTHERS' NECESSITIES.”***

**AND HERE'S WHERE SOME OF US MIGHT BEGIN TO BALK AT THE CHALLENGE OF MOSES TO CHOOSE LIFE & PROSPERITY OVER DEATH & ADVERSITY.**

WINTHROP CONCLUDES HIS SERMON WITH THESE WORDS: *"BELOVED, THERE IS NOW SET BEFORE US LIFE & GOOD, DEATH & EVIL IN THAT WE ARE COMMANDED THIS DAY TO LOVE THE LORD OUR GOD AND TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND TO WALK IN HIS WAYS AND TO KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS.*

*"THEREFORE, LET US CHOOSE LIFE, THAT WE AND OUR POSTERITY MAY LIVE; BY OBEYING HIS VOICE & CLEAVING TO HIM, FOR HE IS OUR LIFE & OUR PROSPERITY."*

MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS LATER, WHEN THOMAS PAINE LOOKED AT THE IMPENDING AMERICAN REVOLUTION, HE SAID, *"WE HAVE IT WITHIN OUR POWER TO MAKE THE WORLD OVER AGAIN."*

WE CAN ONLY HOPE & PRAY THAT THE PEOPLE OF EGYPT RECOGNIZE THE TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY & CHALLENGE THAT LIES BEFORE THEM.

IT ISN'T ONLY IN WORLD-ALTERING EVENTS, THOUGH, THAT WE ARE PRESENTED WITH THIS CHALLENGE.

EACH ONE OF US FACES IT EVERY DAY.

WE'RE FACED WITH CHOICES THAT ARE FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN AN ICE CREAM FLAVOR, TOPPINGS ON A SANDWICH OR THE TYPE OF HOT DRINK WE PREFER.

WE FACE CHOICES ABOUT SACRIFICIAL GIVING & OBEDIENT LIVING – THINGS THAT HAVE ETERNAL SIGNIFICANCE ATTACHED TO THEM.

IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO BE A CASUAL CHRISTIAN.

JESUS DOESN'T WANT A HALF-HEARTED COMMITMENT.

WILL WILLIMON, THE DEAN OF THE CHAPEL AT DUKE UNIVERSITY, TELLS A GREAT STORY ABOUT A PHONE CALL HE ONCE RECEIVED FROM AN IRATE PARENT.

A DUKE STUDENT'S FATHER CALLED HIM & SAID, *"I HOLD YOU PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS!"* "ME?" WILLIMON ASKED.

THAT FATHER WAS UPSET BECAUSE HIS GRADUATE SCHOOL-BOUND DAUGHTER HAD JUST INFORMED HIM THAT SHE WAS GOING TO "THROW IT ALL AWAY" AS THE WAY THE FATHER DESCRIBED IT AND GO DO MISSION WORK WITH THE PRESBYTERIANS IN HAITI.

*"ISN'T THAT ABSURD!"* SHOUTED THE FATHER. *"A BS DEGREE IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING FROM DUKE AND SHE'S GOING TO DIG DITCHES IN HAITI."*

WILLIMON RESPONDED BY SAYING, *"WELL, I DOUBT THAT SHE'S RECEIVED MUCH TRAINING IN THE ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT HERE FOR THAT KIND OF WORK, BUT SHE'S PROBABLY A FAST LEARNER AND WILL GET THE HANG OF DITCH-DIGGING IN A FEW MONTHS."*

THE FATHER WAS NOT AMUSED AND WENT ON TO TALK ABOUT CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT GETTING IN THE WAY OF HIS DAUGHTER'S CAREER.

DR. WILLIMON POINTED OUT THAT THE WELL-MEANING PARENTS WERE THE ONES WHO HAD STARTED THIS BALL ROLLING.

THEY WERE THE ONES WHO HAD HER BAPTIZED, READ BIBLE STORIES TO HER, TOOK HER TO SUNDAY SCHOOL.

HE FINISHED BY SAYING, "YOU'RE THE ONE WHO INTRODUCED HER TO JESUS, NOT ME."

THE FATHER RESPONDED, "BUT ALL WE EVER WANTED HER TO BE WAS A PRESBYTERIAN."

MAKING THE CHOICE THAT MOSES SETS BEFORE THE PEOPLE IN THIS PASSAGE INVOLVES FAR MORE THAN SIMPLY BEING A PRESBYTERIAN.

IT MEANS MORE THAN BEING IN SUNDAY SCHOOL & WORSHIP EVERY SUNDAY.

IN FACT, IT MEANS MORE THAN SIMPLY KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS.

MARTIN LUTHER ONCE SAID, "A RELIGION THAT GIVES NOTHING, COSTS NOTHING, AND SUFFERS NOTHING IS WORTH NOTHING."

OVER & OVER AGAIN WE ARE CONFRONTED BY THE CALL OF GOD TO TAKE UP OUR CROSS & FOLLOW – TO GIVE SACRIFICIALLY ON BEHALF OF OTHERS – AS CHRIST GAVE SACRIFICIALLY OF HIMSELF FOR US.

IT ISN'T AN EASY CHOICE TO MAKE.

IN FACT, THAT DAILY CALL TO FOLLOW GOD IS SO DIFFICULT THAT MOST OF US FAIL IN MAKING IT MORE OFTEN THAN WE SUCCEED.

THE AMAZING ASPECT OF THIS PASSAGE THOUGH, IS THAT IT ASSURES US THAT GOD – BY GOD'S GRACE – ALWAYS OFFERS ANOTHER CHANCE.

IT WAS THE GRACE OF GOD THAT ALLOWED THE ISRAELITES THE VERY POSSIBILITY OF CHOOSING LIFE WHEN THEIR ACTIONS HAD SHOWN, TIME & TIME AGAIN, THAT THEY HAD CHOSEN DEATH.

GOD ALWAYS STANDS READY TO OFFER ANOTHER CHANCE.

GOD IS THERE WITH YOU ON THE BANKS OF YOUR OWN JORDAN RIVER & CALLS YOU TO RESPOND TO HIS INVITATION TO CHOOSE LIFE & PROSPERITY OVER DEATH & ADVERSITY.

YOU KNOW WHICH YOU WOULD PREFER.

IT'S A NO-BRAINER.

BUT EVEN WHEN THE CHOICE YOU MAKE IS THE WRONG ONE, THE GOD OF THE SECOND CHANCE IS READY TO REDEEM YOU – READY TO LIFT YOU FROM THE DEATH & DEPTHS OF YOUR FAILURE.

GOD OFFERS ANOTHER CHANCE TO "CHOOSE LIFE." AMEN.

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