

SERMON: Choose

TEXT: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

I just finished reading a book titled, *The Light Between Oceans*, by M.L. Stedman. The story takes place beginning in the mid-1920's in Australia. A man named Tom is a lighthouse keeper, and he and his wife Isabel live alone on a remote island. One day a boat washes up on shore. Inside it is the body of a man along with a crying infant. Isabel immediately grabs the baby, and Tom turns toward the lighthouse to send a signal and alert authorities on the mainland.

But Isabel begs him to wait. Over the few years that they have lived on the island, she has suffered two miscarriages and just recently delivered a stillborn baby boy. The baby they have rescued is about the same age as her baby would have been. And she, who was barely functioning under the weight of her grief, has been brought back to life.

Tom is someone who follows the rules to the letter. But he also loves his wife dearly and can't bear to see her suffer any longer. As time goes on, Isabel convinces him over and over again to go along with her plan to raise this baby as their own. The man in the boat was probably her father, and her mother likely drowned. This baby needs loving parents, Isabel argues, and she and Tom deserve to be parents.

So as not to spoil the rest of the story, let me just share that, throughout their lives, Tom and Isabel continue to be confronted by the consequences of their CHOICES - not just for them, but for others.

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." These are the words that Moses speaks to the Israelites shortly before his death, and before their entrance into the promised land. It reminds me a little bit of Door #1 and Door #2 on "Let's Make a Deal." In case you're not familiar with this game show, contestants are offered a prize of let's say, \$100 in

cash. They can simply choose it and walk away richer. But, there are other choices presented to them, as well. There are 3 doors, and behind each one is a prize, like a brand new car, or a trip to Hawaii. But behind one door is a “white elephant” sort of prize, like a lifetime supply of canned meat. If you give up your cash for one of those doors, you could go home celebrating or kicking yourself.

Just as Moses offered the Israelites, God offers us a choice. But there are no tricks or secrets involved in this deal. This passage makes it very clear that what you get depends on what you give. “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 the Lord God will bless you.... But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish....”

If that were not a harsh enough message, Jesus actually seems to make it worse in the verses we heard from his Sermon on the Mount. "If you are angry with a brother or sister..., if you insult a brother or sister... you will be liable [to judgment, or] to the hell of fire.... If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

Of course, most of us prefer the promise that God is "merciful and just, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" over the threat of how we're going to be "thrown into hell" if we disobey God's commandments. But it occurred to me that perhaps the punishment of hell is more a natural consequence than an imposed logical consequence of our behavior.

In a book I read about parenting, I learned that there are natural consequences and logical consequences. Natural consequences are those that occur naturally; they are not controlled or manipulated by anyone. For example, when you put

your finger in an electric socket, you get a shock. Parents don't have to punish a child for such behavior because the pain of the shock serves as a natural consequence.

However, to allow a natural consequence such as electric shock is too dangerous. So parents would be smart to impose a logical consequence to keep a child away from electric sockets. For instance, a logical consequence for a child who's trying to stick an object in a socket would be to take the object away. Perhaps a better example would be if a teenager arrives home an hour later than expected, the logical consequence would be to deny the privilege of going out the next night.

I don't believe God "throws us" into hell because of our behavior. I believe we create our own hell by the poor choices we make. Looking back at Jesus' words from Matthew, if you murder someone, you have to live with the hell of that act for the rest of your life. If you let anger get the best of you, your hell might be a broken relationship. And when you're dishonest, you create a

hell that resembles a tangled web of deceit from which there is no escape.

Granted, many of us can relate times when we have suffered a hell that was *not* of our own creation, despite our best choices, and completely outside our control. Disease, accidents, natural disasters and the like don't discriminate when choosing their victims.

And yet, when all is said and done, we still have a choice. We can give up and give in to depression and death, or we can **CHOOSE LIFE.**

A Bible commentary explained that these verses from Deuteronomy are some of the final words that Moses delivers to the Israelites as he prepared to die and they prepared to enter the Promised Land. "Delivering God's message, Moses now declares to them that they have two choices – either life and prosperity or death and adversity – the choice rests with them....

For Israel, life and prosperity meant that all human activity would be under the protection of the Divine. They would live securely on the land; their land would be fertile and prosperous; and they as a people would be fertile, blessed with many offspring and descendants. On the contrary, death would mean that all human activity would be devoid of the divine presence. The people would be forced to exist outside of the land, without security and peace.” (Carol J. Dempsey, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, p. 340)

The following poem is attributed to Mother Teresa, as the verses were found written on the wall of her home for children in Calcutta, India:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

*If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and
some genuine enemies.*

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.

Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway.

This is what it means to choose life - not just for yourself,
but for others. Choosing life means choosing security, peace, and
divine presence. Choosing life means "loving the Lord your God,

obeying [God], and holding fast to [God].” Choosing life means planting roses and appreciating their beauty, despite their sharp thorns. Choosing life means honoring all life, and doing whatever you can to promote life rather than destroy it. Choosing life means embracing the God of new life, abundant life, and eternal life.

May we all CHOOSE wisely. May we all CHOOSE LIFE! To the glory of God!

AMEN.