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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

[Before I turn to this morning's sermon, let me give you a quick update on my husband, Pastor Gregory Fryer. He was rather pleased with himself earlier this week when he met a visiting occupational therapist for the first time and she asked him, "Are you the patient? You look like an ordinary guy!"

I think that is true. He does look like an ordinary guy. He had open heart surgery three weeks ago, but he does not look haggard or weak. He does tire easily, so he rests quite a lot off and on during the day. But he is getting stronger week by week. He asks me to extend his warm greetings to you all and is grateful for your prayers. Now, let's turn to my opening text.]

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

This morning's First Lesson includes an exhortation that at first glance should be easy enough to fulfill. Moses says this to Israel, to you and to me:

I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse;
therefore *choose life*...(Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

All God's creatures love life, from the fish in the sea to the birds of the air and to humanity. So, we should be happy to obey the divine exhortation to "choose life." Who would not want to "choose life?"

And yet, we often fall short of this sensible standard. Instead of choosing life, we can, and sometimes do, work ourselves to death, drink ourselves to death, and ignore our neighbors in such a way as to suggest that we do not care whether they die too.

I think that the key thing to notice in today's text is that Moses connects "life" with "the ways of the Lord." For him, to "choose life" means something we might not have thought much about. He wants us to understand that to really *live*, to really flourish in this world, requires that we pay attention to the question, "What does the universe ask of me?" God and the world are waiting for us. They ask something of us. And *choosing life* for us requires that we heed their call.

The great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel (1907-1972) writes this:

“The Bible is an answer to the question, What does God require of man? But to modern man, this question is suppressed by another one, namely, What does man demand of God? Modern Man continues to ponder: What will I get out of life? What escapes his attention is the fundamental, yet forgotten question, What will life get out of me?”¹

From a very young age we instinctively focus our energies and our thoughts on the question, “What do I need?” As infants, of course, that is what life is all about – getting our needs met. So we cry when we are hungry or need a diaper change, or when we feel afraid or lonely; when mother is no longer in view and we haven’t yet learned that she will come back.

When we are baptized, our parents and godparents make the commitment to teach us the faith of the church – the commandments, the Lord’s prayer and the Creed – and to take us to the Lord’s house where we may begin to learn that our life is given to us for a purpose beyond our needs and our desires. As we grow in the faith and in knowledge of our relationship to our Lord Jesus, we may begin to realize that along with the gift of life comes a calling and a responsibility to be a blessing to others – to be a blessing to the world, rather than a burden. We learn, hopefully, that, as God’s faithful people, the question that should guide our life is not, What do I need? What do I need to be happy, to be blessed, to live a good life, or whatever... but, What does God require of me? What must I do with the gifts that God has given me in order to be a blessing to the world?

I would venture to guess that as I say this it sounds right to you – it makes sense. I hope so! Still, how well we know that what we sometimes perceive as our *needs* has a sneaky way of working its way to the forefront of our attention and taking over our desires. We see the latest iPhone or electronic device and think, “Oh! I gotta get me one of those!” Advertising has a way of distracting us and tempting us to think that what we **want** we **must have**

¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *Insecurity of Freedom* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1967; first published in 1959) pages 4-5.

– **we need** – and we too easily begin to focus our energies on acquiring whatever it is that has struck our fancy.

Or maybe it's not stuff – possessions – that tempt us, but the pull of relationships. Our children have soccer games on Sunday mornings. We don't want them to be sad about missing a game so we miss worship instead. We want to stay out late on Saturday evening partying with our friends, but it means sleeping in on Sunday morning and missing church. We live in a world where there are so many demands on us, so many things competing for our attention, and so many ways we are told "You need this!" Many of these things are good and fun and worthwhile!

We are faced with decisions each and every day. We have countless choices to make all day long. How to order our time, spend our money, where to go, what to do, with whom to be, and so on. Many of these decisions are made without much deliberation – do I want to eat this candy bar or that one? However, some choices are much harder to make.

The issue raised by our readings – especially from Deuteronomy and Luke – is that of the basis upon which we make our choices? I daresay we most naturally fall back on the question of our needs and wants. Our Lord, however, is calling us to reorient our minds so that instead we base our decisions on Heschel's great question, "**What does the Lord require of me?**"

Imagine. What would our world be like if everyone did that? What if every person's life was guided by the earnest desire to do whatever it is that the Lord requires. What a blessing that would be for our poor world!

Here's a humble example: This past week I heard about a young newlywed couple who gave a tithe of all the money they were given as wedding gifts to the Malaria Campaign to combat Malaria in Africa. What a blessing! How many other couples would instead think about the furniture they could buy or trips they could take with that money?

Because, after all, what does the Lord require of us? There is a famous answer to that question in the Bible:

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the

LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8, RSV)

So, I think that this young couple who gave a tithe of their wedding presents to the Malaria Campaign was really living! Their life was becoming richer and fuller, though their bank account was going down and they were missing out on some of the luxuries of their honeymoon. But they were making themselves alive because they were remembering to “do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with [their] God.”

DEUTERONOMY

Let’s take a glance at the context for our reading from Deuteronomy Chapter 30. Israel stands between the Exodus and the Promised Land. This is the end of Moses’ long sermon – the sermon began with the giving of the law (the Ten Commandments). Now, having laid before them all that God requires of His people, Moses says – what will you choose? Life or death? Will you choose to follow the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and promises you a Land flowing with milk and honey – or some alternative? The thing is – you cannot have both – you can’t follow the Lord God and also follow other gods or goddesses – it’s one or the other! We know all too well that the story of Israel is littered with one bad choice after another: rebellion, exploitation, chasing other gods, idolatry, and so on. Still, God doesn’t give up! Again and again the Lord calls Israel to come back and choose life!

We too stand in a similar place – we find ourselves between the resurrection of Jesus and the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Kingdom of God. We too are wandering in the wilderness and Jesus is calling us to choose life! Does he really mean we must hate our loved ones and give up all of our possessions? Well - maybe! I guess it depends on how you answer the question, “What does the Lord require of me?” If we place our loved ones above God, we have not chosen life. If we place our possessions and experiences and careers and aspirations above God, then we have not chosen life. But if we choose life – if we make God first in our lives in every way, then the other things will somehow fall into place. Our love for our families

will not be disordered, but proper and even righteous. Our desires for material things and success and our hopes and dreams will not be at odds or competing with our life of faithfulness to God.

Again, choosing life means nothing less than walking in the ways of our Lord – to first of all do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. To choose life, as the psalmist says, is to take delight in the law of the Lord; to meditate upon it day and night. Let it be our compass and our guide in all things. And then, like trees planted by streams of water – we will bear fruit in due season, our leaves will not wither, and everything we do will prosper for the benefit of our world. These are the blessings that God promises us when we choose life.

THE CROSS

We can count on such promises because there is One among us who perfectly chose life. No flash of lightning and boom of thunder in a thunderstorm have ever reverberated so deeply through the centuries and through all eternity than the very Word of God dying on the Cross on that first Good Friday. It is as if with his dying breath Jesus was saying to his heavenly Father and to all the universe: “I choose life! Death for me, but life for the world!” Life, for you, for me. And it is *his* great choice of life that makes all of our little choices of life reasonable for us and helpful for our God and for our neighbors. And this is what he teaches us,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. (Luke 9:24)

Choosing life may sometimes feel to us like losing life – but our risen Lord Jesus went down that path and has triumphed. Choosing life means following him, cross and all. In faithfully following Jesus we shall find life in abundance – beyond anything we can possibly imagine – indeed, adventure upon adventure and all of them true! And to this One who chose life for all the world by taking on the Cross be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.