My opening text for this morning’s sermon is from our First Lesson, from Deuteronomy 30. Let me lift up for you the solemn words of Moses to the people of Israel. They are about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. Moses himself is an old man. He is not going to make it to yonder side of the River. But he has a last chance to pour out his heart to the people to whom he has been pastor for forty years. He says this to his people:

19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life... (Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

Life is a sweet word. Think of life when it is good — when you want to dance and kick up your heels, say, when everybody knows that you’ve done a good job at something, or when you are recovered from illness and are feeling good again, or when someone has captured your heart and you love everyone in sight, when you are glad to wake up in the morning and eager for the day. This is the kind of life our Maker wants for us. He wants fullness of life. Moses does not want his people to throw away their chances at life. I do not want us to throw away our chances!

In the name of Almighty God, our Maker, Moses begs us to choose life. Let us heed him. The old pastor stands before his people on the edge of the Jordan River. His hair is white, his beard is white, his back is somewhat bent with old age and with forty years of carrying responsibility for his people. He preaches to them. He pleads with them to choose life, not death.

Let us picture ourselves among that congregation, for after all, we have been baptized into the people of God. So, there we stand, along with Joshua and all the other Israelites who have been walking with Moses toward the Promised Land. We have had our ups and downs traveling toward this point in life. We have known good times and we have known bad times. And now here we stand on the edge of the Promised Land listening to old Moses and his appeal that we should choose life. I say it again, let us heed him. Let us resolve here and now that henceforth, more than ever, we are going to choose life!

For some of us, the meaning of that appeal to life has some quite evident and immediate consequences. If we are smokers, for example, we should stop. By now the medical evidence is quite overwhelming against smoking. Likewise with abuse of alcohol. If you become a drunkard from time to time,
stop that! If you drive or a ride in a car, put on your seatbelt. That is only reasonable. Choose life!

Some of these things are pretty easy to figure out. If you eat too much, cut back. If you exercise too little, there is probably some form of exercise or some form of exercise equipment that you will enjoy. So find it, get some more exercise, join Pastor Carol’s new Immanuel hiking group, choose life!

St. Paul says that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we ought not to defile something that is holy:

19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

I grew up taking this teaching seriously. I believed what the apostle said about our bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit. I still believe this teaching from my childhood. I figure that this teaching means that our Maker has an interest in our bodies. They should be in good working order and of use to Him, as far as we can accomplish it. It is not just our own private business how we take care of ourselves. It is also a matter of great interest to our Maker. So choose life, as Moses preached so long ago.

Moses is not preaching simply his own personal opinion. No, he is speaking for God. He calls upon heaven and earth as witnesses. He believes that when he asks us to choose life, his preaching is true to the mind of God. And that is quite a thought! It is not just Moses who wants us to choose life, so does our Maker. The One who created life wants us to cherish life. Choose life! The One who was unwilling that this world should be without you appeals to you now, through this old man, Moses, to cherish your life. And the One who was unwilling that this world should be without your neighbor appeals to you now through the old words of Moses to cherish the life of your neighbor. That is why you should obey the Ten Commandments. You should not murder your neighbor or rob your neighbor or break your neighbor’s heart through adultery or gossip about your neighbor and drag down his or her reputation. Turn away from those sins so that you can choose life—life for both yourself and for your neighbor.

Consider this old preacher, Moses. He was someone who was willing to lay down his own life for the sake of his people. When the people sinned in a most outrageous way, Moses interceded for them:

But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin -- and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. (Exodus 32:32, RSV)
So, when Moses cries out to the people to choose *life*, he is someone who loved the life of his people enough that he was willing to give his own life for them. He who offered up his own life for the sake of his people now pleads with his people to not be casual or careless with their own lives. He who was willing to have his name blotted out of the Lord’s book of life pleads with his people to not think so little of their own lives that they just fritter them away.

In our Bible passage this morning, Moses does not speak with lots of concrete detail about what it means to choose life. This is not the right occasion for speaking of this or that concrete matter. The people have arrived at the edge of the Jordan. Life stretches before them, with all of its complexities, challenges, and temptations. It is time for the big picture. It is time for comprehensive discourse about one’s manner of life. Moses has spent chapter upon chapter preaching about the Ten Commandments. Now is the time to talk about the point of it all. The point is life! Choose life. Cherish life. Walk in the ways of the Lord.

That is my main theme for this sermon. Choose life by choosing to walk in the ways of the Lord. In all the various circumstances and challenges and temptations of life, we should choose life by choosing the ways of the Lord.

To begin on this theme, consider this morning’s appointed Psalm—Psalm 1. It is a happy Psalm. It speaks of trees planted by streams of water. It is the keynote Psalm. It is what the whole collection of Psalms is about. It takes the preaching of Moses and makes poetry of it. Listen again to the opening words of our Psalm for this morning:

1Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!  
2Their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and they meditate on his law day and night.  
3They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;  
everything they do shall prosper. (Psalm 1:1-3, LBW)

Therefore, as Moses said, choose life! This is the testimony of many good people through the ages. Delight in the law of the Lord. That is how you become like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither, and prospering in everything you do. This is how we choose life. We delight in the law of the Lord and try our best to walk in that law. This is how we make life good for ourselves and for our communities.

Now let us turn to this morning’s Gospel Lesson. It is from St. Luke Chapter 14, and it is one of what are called the “hard sayings of our Lord.” It is natural, I believe, that as I read the opening verses aloud, our minds will be drawn to
what Jesus says about our loved ones—about mother and father and spouse and children and siblings. But I would like us also to notice what Jesus says about our own life, because “life” is what we are talking about now. We are trying to deal with the appeal of Moses that we should choose life. So the opening verses of our Gospel Lesson go this way:

25Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, 26If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-26, RSV, my emphasis)

First a note about vocabulary. That word “hate.” Sometimes in the Bible that word does not mean the despising of someone but rather the preferring of someone else. So, for example, the Bible said that the patriarch Jacob loved Rachel but “hated” his other wife, Leah (Genesis 29:31). In the context it is pretty clear that this means simply that Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah. He probably loved Leah a lot. He should have! But he loved Rachel more.

I think that it would be true to the overall preaching of Jesus to interpret this morning’s Gospel Lesson in this same manner. Jesus is not calling us to hate our loved ones. Do you imagine that he hated Mary, his mother? No way! It is rather that Jesus is calling us to choose him—to choose him best of all.

So when it comes to this matter of “life,” as in Moses’s call to choose life, Jesus is saying that we should choose him – Jesus - best of all. If we would truly have life, then be true to Jesus. Bet on Jesus. Bet your life on Jesus! Jesus walked in the ways of the Lord. He was this world’s great Tree planted by streams of water. He knew the ways of the Lord—naturally he did, since he is the Author of those ways. Jesus knew the ways of the Lord, he walked in them to love’s supreme degree of even dying for the sake of the world, and he looks at you and me right in the eye and he says to us, “follow me.”

For us here in New York City in the twenty-first century that is still the way of life for us and for our community. In all the perplexities, complexities, pressures, and temptations of the city, we are to choose life by trying to walk with Jesus. The Israelites of old crossed the Jordan River and entered into the Promised Land with this sermon of Moses ringing in their hearts, “choose life.” And here we are in modern New York City, about to cross the threshold of the church and to head out into our world. For us too, let us choose life. In particular let us choose life by walking ever more closely with our Lord and

Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen