

When I was just beginning the ordination process, for the priesthood, I had to go on a weekend with other folks, also in the process, to be interviewed and assessed by the Bishop, and the Commission on Ministry. One of the things you had to arrive with so you could talk about it at some point during the time we were together, were the verses from Scripture that'd had the greatest impact on our lives of faith.

Once that part of the weekend got going, my peers pulled out some real heavy hitting classics: Psalm 23 was in there: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ... he makes me lie down in green pastures, he restores my soul. 1 Corinthians 13 ... Love is patient, love is kind ... it bears all things ... endures all things. Love never ends. Matthew 11:28 Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Beautiful verses all of them.

Turns out I was the only one who'd been inspired by verses from Deuteronomy ... Deuteronomy 30, verses 19 and 20 were revelatory for me, they changed my relationship with the Bible, with faith, and with the church, and they've shaped my theology and my relationship with God through Jesus Christ ever since.

These verses come towards the end of Deuteronomy, as Moses finishes up delivering the Law to the Israelites, still in the wilderness, but now right on the edge of going on and into the Promised Land to begin their new lives, Moses says:

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God, for that means life to you.¹

God is calling God's people into relationship, into covenant, so they might know the life they were created for, fullness of life, in and with God, with and for one another.

This, this is what we were created for... and that insight, as someone who had firmly rejected the faith and the church, blew my mind. I thought religion was all sin and drudgery, repentance that could never be sufficient, I thought religion was about rules and judgements that limited life, that puts limits on freedom – man alive, did I get that wrong!

It was a revelation truly, that all this is about choosing *life*. And the goodness of that, the promise of that, was something that would change my life forever. I'd caught a glimpse of what life actually is, could be, should be, and choosing *life*, over and over again, has defined my life ever since.

For our ancestors in the faith, the story didn't end with them being led into the Promised Land. It was still a struggle to survive, there was still pain and suffering, there were still conflicts and disputes and war, and, as humans have since the beginning, folks were tempted by what the world promised, and they chose to respond to the struggle to survive by choosing the world's ways rather than staying in covenant with God.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:19-20

God promised provision, safety, protection, for heart and soul, but folks wanted comfort and certainty, for their minds and for their bodies; and so they trusted in their own selves, and the world they lived in, to get for themselves the lives they thought they wanted.

Folks trusted in human power and in taking control, folks trusted in the power of status and wealth to change the lives they were living, make them the best they believed could be.

And by choosing to live outside of God, making their own selves primary, their own lives ultimate, folks actually chose to give death all the power, because this way of living keeps folks mindful, always, of all that can be lost. And so there is fear, fear of loss and fear of death; and life becomes avoiding death, or using death as a weapon, using death to control – this is the alternative, this is the other option to choosing *life* in God.

About a millennium after Moses gave the Israelites the choice of life or death, Jesus was born. Life under the Roman Empire was generally pretty brutal, and death was most certainly in the world, and death shaped the lives of most. The people longed for a powerful messiah, a warrior king to set them free. Someone who could lead them out, command armies, reign down God's judgement, a mighty messiah who might reestablish the once powerful Kingdom of Israel, so they might know freedom, so they might know *life*.

The Messiah did come, did come into the world to lead the people, but not in the way the people had hoped for, or expected, not in the way that many could even understand.

Jesus was no recognizable warrior-king, Jesus was, instead, a “shepherd,” a shepherd come to lead us out of death and into life.

... into the *life* that has always been here, but is so easily hidden/smothered by a loud and noisy world, and can be so very hard for us to find, if we even know what it is we’re looking for. So we need Jesus, our shepherd, to lead us to it, guide us in it.

Because *life*, this life, is so very hard to know solely with our senses, hard to know what it looks like, or feels like, until we choose it, and get there, and embody it.

And there’s a lot in our way. This loud and noisy world is, literally, selling us the alternative – and the world needs us to buy what it’s selling for it to survive. The world insists that life is about being alive, staying alive, at all costs; it tells us life is about being healthy, able-bodied, beautiful, comfortable, pain and illness and suffering and struggle-free. The world tells us that having life is about being able to earn or buy the comfort and certainty we want; it’s about living autonomously, being independent, protecting our own interest. This way of living is measured in dollars and cents, in status, and appeal, by the ability we have to control and influence the lives we live.

And we can live for this, thinking this is what it’s all about, that comfort and control will bring us the deep peace we’re longing for...

But fullness of life in God is something else.

Life, the life that Moses urged our ancestors in the faith to choose, the abundant life that Jesus came to lead us into, *life* flows from our deep knowing that all life is of God.

Life is an outpouring of God's love, that's made real and actual in this world through relationship, the relationship we have with God and the relationships we have with one another. Relationship gives love shape and form in the world, and this love sucks the power out of fear, and without fear, death has no control over us. And this is what life is, can be, should be, it's what life is 'for,' to eliminate the power death has over our lives and to draw us into Communion, with God and with one another.

Life and death are still set before us, blessings and curses; day after day, we still get to choose, over and over, again and again.

Jesus, our mighty messiah, did come, is still here, is still the shepherd leading us into life, abundant life in God through him and our hearts, the essence of our being, know his voice.

Whether we respond to his call and follow his Way is, and always will be, our choice.

Choose life.

Amen.