

## Choosing Life

A Sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent  
September 9, 2007

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For a good long time, this time of year is going to feel a bit odd. We experience an emotional and intellectual dissonance so close to September 11<sup>th</sup>. I think it was this strangeness to which the punk band Green Day refer in their song, “Wake Me Up When September Ends.” Well, September is here, and September 11<sup>th</sup> is on Tuesday. It evokes for us a range of conflicting emotions.

Sorrow and lament linger over lost lives and lost innocence. Anger lingers over decisions made and failed to be made since then. Fear and foreboding linger over the world since that day. I think it is important that we remain attentive to each other and to all of those emotions and thoughts that arise so close to 9-11.

I don’t think it is a stretch to suggest that what we experience, possibly generally, but definitely acutely, at this time of year, could be described as the feeling, the experience of exile. Exile is the experience of disconnection from that which we consider to be home, safety, familiar, predictable. Now we long for that time and that place. Exile is disorienting. It is disillusioning, and there are many temptations in exile. The temptation to despair. The temptation to medicate, either with drugs or with entertainment. The temptation to turn off all of outside stimuli and just focus on the now, because that is all we can bear to do.

Exile is disorienting. Our text this morning, from the Book of Deuteronomy, is about two exiles. “Now, wait a second,” you’re saying. “I thought the story was Moses speaking to the Israelites about to cross into the Promised Land. The exile hasn’t even happened yet.” While that is the literary setting for our reading today, it is not the context in which Deuteronomy was written. Deuteronomy. *Deutero - nomos*. The second law written to the exiles, for whom the story of entering into the Promised Land is a familiar one, but who no longer live in that place, no longer enjoy the safety and the identity of home. They now live in another land, a foreign land, and are tempted by the deities there – the deities promising this or that.

The writers of Deuteronomy are speaking to those exiles. By retelling the story of the entry into the Promised Land, they are now encouraging the exiles not to lose hope. They are instructing the exiles on the true meaning of what it means to have a Promised Land and what it means to worship this God, who gave it to them, this “Yahweh.”

The Deuteronomist is preparing the people for their return. You see, their exile raised not just political questions but caused the people to ask “what political

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decisions did we make wrong? Did we not make the right decisions with our armies? Why were we not able to fend off those who were threatening us?"

But even larger than that, a theological question. "Why would God give us land and then take it away? Why would God have provided this abundance and then pillage it? Why would God have done that?"

Our own theological questions today abound. "Why are we in the mess that we are in? What went wrong? What decision was the wrong decision? What practice did we not pay attention to? Why are we here? How do we get out of it, and what hope do we have of ever getting out of this mess?"

Deuteronomy addresses the exiles first with encouragement. This commandment is not too far away from you. You don't have to go anywhere else to look for it. It is as close as your heart. Well, that is easy to say, but it is harder to practice.

What is it that is so close? What is it that you are talking about? Phrases later, we hear that you are to love the Lord your God above all, that you are not to bow down to other gods and to serve them.

the distinctive message that Deuteronomy is giving, adding onto the other four books of the Torah, is that what the people forgot was the least among them. They started serving the gods in the land. They started thinking they were self-sufficient, that they were self-made people. That if they followed this or that smaller deity, they would be just fine. But they forgot the bigger picture, and the bigger picture was that their God, Yahweh, was the creator of heaven and earth.

Not only that, but their God was the God that looked upon *them* in slavery in Egypt and liberated them from it. And their God was the God, whom having liberated them from slavery, reminded them all along the way, "Remember, you were slaves in Egypt. Therefore ..." Deuteronomy says it again and again, "Remember the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Remember, you were slaves in Egypt, so you must remember the widow, the orphan, and the stranger." These three epitomize those in their society who had no power, no money, no voice.

So, the answer to that great theological question of Israel was, "You forgot to worship God. And in forgetting to worship God, you left out those who were the least."

These words of Moses are the functional equivalent of a parent whose teenager is just about to walk out the door to go to college saying, "Oh, before you go, remember who you are. Remember everything I have taught you. Remember

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how strong you are. Remember, and don't forget all of your qualities that people have loved. I am not going to be there any more to look after you and remind you. You are going to have to remember for yourself."

In Christian parlance, it would be like saying, "Remember your baptism. In your baptism, you were set apart, and you were blessed, and you were reminded that above all you are God's and God's alone. God has a special purpose for your life. Listen for that purpose. For if you listen, you will hear it. The message of Moses, and the message of baptism, simply and very broadly put, is, "Choose life. Choose life." Again and again and again and again, choose life.

Now that is very broad. It is hard to even think – how do we apply that kind of commandment – to choose life?

I know some of you might have looked at your bulletin and thought that I was going to preach about reproductive choice, because the phrase "Choose Life" is so tied to that conflict. Yet the phrase "choose life" came thousands of years before the pro-life and pro-choice movements. It addresses something much broader, although it may apply, even in that situation.

What would it mean to choose life, especially in the difficulties of a woman choosing what to do with her own body and with her own pregnancy? These decisions are rarely simple. So how do we apply them?

With regard to our current war in Iraq, how do we apply that – choose life – especially where we are now? Some of us may be angry that there was a lost opportunity years ago to choose life. Preemptive war has instead severely limited our options, but we still have them. That is, I think, the deeper message of this passage from Deuteronomy. First, the God whom we worship is a God of life. That may sound really simple, but do we really believe that – that our God wills life and not death? Do we believe that on a daily basis? Do we believe that now? Do we believe that with our options seeming so limited? That our God is a God of life and admonishes us to choose life – now.

Secondly, there are choices. I think in exile you tend to think that your options are so limited that it is already set out before you. There is not much we can do. We are caught in an inevitable course of history or fate that we must follow. The message of Deuteronomy is that we have choices. We have the choice to do it again, to do it better, to look after those whom we once forgot and to choose life, again and again and again.

So choose life, church, because very few people are hearing this message today. They need to hear it from you.

Amen

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