

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9

6th Sunday After Epiphany
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 12, 2023

The Game of Life

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson for today is from the last book of the Torah, or in Christianity, the Pentateuch, which consists of the first five books of our Bible. As the people are poised to enter the Promised Land, Moses speaks to them about the fundamental choice between life and death. While not the last words of Moses, the lesson has the character of a farewell address to the people of Israel. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 30:15-20. . .

Introduction to Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson is taken from Paul's first Letter to the church in Corinth. Here the apostle objects to the people's sins of arrogance, jealousy, and quarreling. He wants them to "grow up" and work together as God's servants. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. . .

Sermon

It was on this day, February 12, 1809 that Abraham Lincoln was born. And it was 59 years later, in 1860, that Lincoln was elected President of the United States. That same year, 23-year-old Milton Bradley invented *The Game of Life*. You have probably never seen the original version of the game, which has a red-and-ivory checkerboard of sixty-four squares. Players start on a square labeled "infancy" and end, usually, but not always, at "happy old age." The *Game of Life* requires you to make decisions. Most players try to go to college, heading slowly towards

happiness, but even when you are one square away, you can end up in ruin. Curiously, two directions that almost guarantee that you will lose are “going to prison” or “going into politics.”

Bradley’s game rewards the virtues that lead to wealth and success. The good squares are “honesty,” “bravery,” and “perseverance.” The bad squares are “poverty,” “idleness,” and “disgrace.” The person who wins is the one who gets to “happy old age” first.

Well, a hundred years later, in 1960, the Milton Bradley Company released a commemorative *Game of Life*, which bears little resemblance to its 19th-century namesake. This one is a lesson in consumerism. You may have played this version with your children and grandchildren.

The box is filled with fake money—seven and a half million dollars of fake money—as well as fake automobile insurance and phony stock certificates. Players fill tiny plastic station wagons with even tinier pink and blue plastic mommies and daddies, and have pink and blue plastic babies, but this *Game of Life* is relentlessly cash-conscious. In this version you do not die; you just retire. *Life*’s most important squares are marked “Payday.” In the 1960 game, whoever finishes with the most money is the one who wins—like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, or Jeff Bezos.

And then in 2008 Milton Bradley released *The New Game of Life: Twists & Turns*. In this version life is meaningless. The game’s selling point is that it has no goal. The blurb on the box says, “a thousand ways to live your life. You choose.” Money is a big part of the game, but there is no cash. Each player receives a Visa card to keep track of points. You get the same number of points for scuba diving as for donating a kidney or for getting a Ph.D. In the new game there is no square marked “finish.” It is all pointless. Reminds me of Shakespeare’s words uttered by Macbeth:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
 Signifying nothing. (Act 5, Scene 5, Lines 24-28)

Well, in our Old Testament lesson today from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses expresses a different understanding of “the game of life.” Life for him is not meaningless. It is not about the pursuit of money or retirement. For Moses life is about God and walking in God’s way.

The old prophet who as a baby was hidden in a basket in the bulrushes of the Nile River and found by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised in the Egyptian royal family; the man who encountered the Angel of the Lord at the burning bush on Mount Horeb; the man who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the land that God had promised; the man who received God’s 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai; the old man Moses knows that his days are not long upon the face of the earth. And so he gathers the Hebrew people together at the Jordan River as they are about to enter the Land of Promise. He wants to warn them of the dangers they will face: alternative ethical options, alternative objects of trust, and alternative modes of power. The abundance of this new land may tempt Israel to forget the God who brought them to it.

Moses wants to preach a farewell sermon that the people will take to heart. In fact, his message goes on for some 26 chapters—quite a bit longer than this sermon, you will be relieved to know. 😊

In verses 15-18 of our lesson today Moses lays out the conditions for life and death. Obeying the commandments; loving God; walking in his ways; observing God’s commandments, decrees, and ordinances—doing these leads to life. While turning away from God and practicing idolatry leads to death. In this new land the people will face a choice of

following the commandments of God or submitting to the gods of the Canaanites. Of ordering their lives according to their covenantal commitments or submitting to a different culture.

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; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (vv. 17-18)

Thus did Moses stand before the people of Israel and challenge them to choose life.

There's an old story which says that years ago when spies were captured by the Persian Army and brought in for execution, one particular general would give the spy the odd choice of the firing squad *or* whatever was behind a big, black door. Well, according to the story, the spies would always choose the firing squad. They didn't know that the door led to nothing terrifying. In fact, it led outside. And when the general was asked why he gave the prisoners a choice that could lead to their freedom, he answered,

Almost everyone chooses death over the unknown. People are actually more afraid to live than to die. Anyone with the courage to choose what they don't already know deserves life.

While the words of Deuteronomy were recorded centuries ago in a place most of us here have never seen; nevertheless, they have a striking contemporary relevance. In our modern world of 2023, religious faith is embraced by fewer and fewer people. In Europe church plays little part in the lives of individuals or society. And perhaps that is the central reason Europe is in decline.

Several years ago I was having some car repair work done at a major dealership in Greenville. It so happened that I ventured into the waiting room. Of course, the television was on. And I was dumbfounded at the profanity that was being used. This is what we've come to. It's acceptable to use four letter words in the presence of whomever happens to hear them—man, woman, or child. What will we see and hear watching the Super Bowl later today?

Well, Deuteronomy recognizes that faith and loyalty to God are not only key to well-being in life, but are also antidotes to despair. A lack of hope has become a kind of social disease. Hopelessness breeds despondency. It dehumanizes people so that they no longer reach for the possibilities that life offers. It generates self-pity, self-condemnation, and hatred of others. Modern men and women and young people need to hear and meditate upon these ancient words of scripture. Therein we can find hope.

And as Paul reminds us in our lesson from 1 Corinthians, even people in the church can act like they are people of the flesh, rather than spiritual people. Quarrelling, jealousy, divisiveness, arrogance. Like we have anything but the mind of Christ. Paul implores us to be what God calls us to be: servants of God who work together for the common good.

As we approach the delightful festival of Valentine's Day on Tuesday, would that people recognize the importance of the greatest commandment—to love God. And the second—to love our neighbor, as we love ourselves. But a genuine faith is not just about pious thoughts and warm feelings, but of practical service. So that we worship God *and* care for others like we care for ourselves. Holding fast to God means that we put God first in good times and bad. Holding fast means loving *and* obeying the Lord.

The good life that Deuteronomy envisions does not just happen automatically. The land that God gives must be taken. The life offered must be lived out. And that has to do with obedience to God and his teachings. It has to do with worship, righteousness, justice, and care for the weak and the poor. Honoring of parents. Keeping the Sabbath. Telling the truth.

Moses implored the people of Israel to choose life. Clearly, God has granted us the freedom to make small choices and big choices. While there are many things that are out of our hands, how we respond to them is a matter of choice. And certainly there is no guarantee that

the choices we make will be wise. We can turn to God, or we can turn away from God. We can choose life, or death.

From the pages of Deuteronomy, Moses' voice echoes across the centuries. Choose life. It's not a game. It is a sacred journey. It's not about money; it's about faithfulness. It's not pointless; it's purposeful. It does not lead to nowhere; it leads to a life that is blessed, and is a blessing to others.

Whatever notions of life exist as alternatives in a world of many gods—money, pleasure, power, self-centeredness—the Bible insists without qualification that there is really only one way to find life and well-being, and that is the Lord's way. So exercise your freedom positively and choose that way. Choose the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. (Jn. 14:6) Choose life.

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