February 16, 2014 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

Creating God, who spoke the world into being with a word, who nourishes us with bread, but moreso with the words from your mouth, we give you thanks for the ears to hear, the lips to repeat, and the lives to embody all that you are saying. We give you thanks that you call us to be both instruments and partners in your continuing creation. And we pray for help in taking the time for holiness, the time not simply to hear what you are saying but also the time to learn it and comprehend. Unplug us from the distractions around us long enough to focus our attention on you, and the joys that you are unfolding.

We give you thanks for new possibilities, and for the hunger to lean into them. Nudge our choices, that they may beckon life rather than tempting death. For all those who walk alongside of us, we are grateful, but moreso for the assurance that you are guiding the way in front of us. Bless us, in such holy company, with patience, with energy, with creativity and clarity, and the courage to open ourselves to the new worlds that you are bringing into being.

And along every step of the way, keep us attentive to each other, and all those who ache in body, mind, or circumstance.

We would be your people, O God – trusting, following, responding to your call. It's foggy, sometimes, so help us to keep up, to keep you in view, and to not lose our way. For we pray in the name of Jesus, who gave us the words to pray, saying: Our father who art in heaven...

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 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. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that 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 him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*

***“Choosing LIfe”***

As enjoinders go, this one sounds rather like a 2-inch putt -- an Olympic downhill run off the bunny slope. Duh! Who wouldn’t choose life? Well, I don’t know. Perhaps we might ask Philip Seymour Hoffman. Or the two teenagers at whose funerals I officiated last year brought about by their suicide. Or the 22 veterans who took their own lives every day last year -- almost one every hour of every day; and those just the ones who showed up in the official statistics. 8030 that we know about who sized up the options and chose death instead of life.

What gives? I thought this was supposed to be easy, but maybe it turns out to be more complicated than we thought. That, thickened by the reality that "choosing life" is about more than just getting out of bed in the morning, and "choosing death" about more than simply suicide.

That had certainly proven to be true for the Israelites. Having lived as slaves to the Egyptians and survived their escape across the Red Sea and the wilderness beyond, they found themselves perched on the threshold of a new and ambiguous life, ready to cross over into the land that had been promised, listening to Moses’ “last lecture” or his farewell sermon. Apprehensive, a little disoriented, and sensing that they were about to lose in Moses the only minister many of them could remember, they readied themselves for the next step in their journey. And Moses tells them to “choose life.” He also tells them what he means by that. If you have been listening over the course of the past two weeks you will find his annotation sounding an awful lot like what we heard from the prophets Micah and Isaiah.

“Practice justice,” Micah had exhorted, “love loyally, with commitment and tenacity; and walk obediently with God, hanging on God’s every word.”

“Worship God,” Isaiah insisted, “by following the ways of God.”

Or as Moses here puts it: “*walk in God’s ways; love, listen to, obey and hold fast to the Lord your God, for that means life to you and length of days in that land that God is giving you.”*

But there is caveat. “If you ***don’t*** do that,” Moses cautioned, “you won’t last long here in this precious land. Abandoning the ways of God will be akin to ‘choosing death’ and all the grief that goes along with it.” Or, as the book of Leviticus so graphically paraphrases the divine warning, “*keep my statutes and my ordinances...otherwise the land will vomit you out”* (18:26, 28).

Now THAT’S a pretty picture! Unfortunately, one doesn’t have to continue reading very far into the story to discover that that’s precisely what happened. More and more distracted by what THEY wanted than what God wanted; more and more persuaded by fast talkers and smooth salesmen and an envy of their neighbors; more and more enamored by what glittered and fizzed; increasingly addicted to shortcuts and feeling good and self-indulgence, the land did, indeed, “vomit them out” in the form of military defeat, political extinction, and exile to a foreign land where the best and the brightest lived under the thumb of their oppressors.

But here, though, is where the story to me gets interesting. Years go by -- 50 or 60 years depending on how you count -- until finally the exiles were allowed to return home. Scholars suggest that it was at this time that the story of Moses’ speech to the Israelites was remembered and retold; as a kind of “text” for their own moment of “crossing over” into the Promised Land when it would now be their turn to “choose life or death” in the land that God was giving them all over again.

Because “new beginnings” are always like that: uneasy, vulnerably pregnant moments when we make fresh choices and new commitments about who we will be -- and “whose” we will be -- and how we will live in the days ahead. It’s when, for example, we perform that determinative “gut check” -- or perhaps we should call it a “soul check” --

* when we reassess and reassert the values and parameters that will guide and frame our choices;
* when, at least as people of God, we decide afresh whether we are going to chase after the movements of God in the world, doing our best to discern the expressions of holiness and the character of obedience, or chase after other intoxications that (let’s face it) often strike us as more appealing and attractive;

Of course all this “choosing” business sounds easier and clearer than it ever really is. In reality we know that the choices that present themselves to us are hardly ever labeled "life" and "death," and rarely seem to rise to that level of importance. We are more accustomed to choosing between “paper” or “plastic” -- skim or 2% -- than we are “life” or “death", but decisions for life or death are closer than we might think. And sometimes they seem counter-intuitive -- rather like the western divergence of highway 5 at I-35. Heading west, if you want to go south you veer north; if you want to head north you veer south. Crazy! If you are just traveling along following your intuition, you are going to wind up a long way from where you want to be. And a lot of the choices that confront us feel that backwards in the moment.

But we choose death anytime we give ourselves over to what simply does not matter -- when we devote our energies to the trivial; when we spend our health on that which doesn’t endure; when we “rush to meet deadlines that are insignificant and bow before ideas that are not worthy” (Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration).

Moses' sermon, there on the cusp of ***their*** fresh beginning, along with the returning exiles’ reappropriation of that sermon on the front edge of theirs invites us to sift through the granules of ***our own*** new beginning here on the edge of which we are standing as a congregation, and on which we are always standing as individuals in one sense or another: what we are doing with our loving and our serving -- with our compassion for the poor, with our defense of justice, with our care for the hurting; with our defense of the weak; with our stewardship of creation. I know it doesn't seem like much when we flip someone off who cuts in front of us on the freeway, or stuff into the garbage what we ought to be recycling, but it adds up you know around us and inside us. These are moments that invite us to recalibrate, moving forward, our measure of success and our investments in what we think really matters -- among which I would include…

* laughing for the sheer joy of it;
* crying when we need to;
* playing with a child;
* Taking a walk in the woods or a wide open field;
* having coffee with a friend;
* reading a poem;
* Singing a song, even if our only audience is the shower head;
* going to church;
* chewing slowly and actually tasting what you eat;
* brushing a dog; listening for the purr of a cat;
* breathing deeply;
* writing a letter to someone out of touch;
* planting a seed and practicing the discipline of watering it;
* turning off the TV and taking a nap if need be;
* saying “thank you” and “I’m sorry” and “I love you” to someone, or several someone's, and meaning all three;
* honestly pondering whether we believe our best days are behind us -- which is an act of “choosing death” -- or yet in front of us -- which is a faith-filled choice for life.

I have a long-time friend who had worked his way up the ladder to occupy a pretty significant job. He made a lot of money -- more in any given year, in fact, than I am likely to cumulatively earn in my lifetime. But it came at a price -- travel, pressures, stress, the weight of knowing that in the balance of every one of the constant decisions he made hung millions of dollars and who knows how many jobs. That, and the long-term viability of the company. He got by on caffeine, cocktails, a few hours of sleep each night, adrenaline and the sheer force of a considerable will. A few years back, he started having some health problems that eventually wound him up one afternoon in the office of his long-time doctor, who, after the usual series of diagnostics, posed to my friend a hypothetical: "What if I were to tell you that you had 6-months to live? What would you do?"

Without much hesitation, apparently, my friend responded, "quit my job, move back to the lake, and start spending more time with my wife."

"Well," said the doctor, "by my estimate you have about 6 months to live. Your blood-pressure alone, to say nothing of the rest of your stress factors, is quite literally about to kill you. I suggest you turn your list into an action plan."

And to his credit, he did. The good news is that that conversation took place about 3 years ago, and in ways that I haven't heard him express in decades, he is happy, with a kind of stillness I have never observed in him, and as healthy as anybody our age has any right to be. The joke of it all is that he’s become a minister.

Now, I know that not everybody enjoys his kind of freedom. And few of us get the benefit of that kind of 2X4 smacking us in the face. But that doesn't let us off the hook of responding to Moses on the terms that he lays out, in ways that are appropriate to our particularities. What kinds of choices are we in the midst of making, and what will it mean to live with them -- as individuals, and as a congregation in the company of a new minister, serving God in a changing Norwalk and a changing world?

“*I call heaven and earth to witness*,” Moses said to them -- and I would argue, to us as well -- *“that 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 him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in this precious land that God is stretching out before you.*”

After all, you wouldn't want to upset the stomach of the land.