

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last weekend, Confirmation 2023 began with a lock-in at the church on Friday night and Saturday morning, and another gathering for lunch after worship and our second session. Ten 6th-8th graders are participating in Confirmation this year: Fisher Blanton; Robert Coombs; Windsor Fariior; Hannah Floyd; Miller Ludlum; JJ Rouse; Hayes Skidmore; Burroughs Strickland; Parker Thompson; and Trace Thompson. I ask that you keep all of these young people and their leaders in your prayers over the next three months as we explore what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

This is the formal description of Confirmation from our Presbyterian *Book of Order*: “When those who have been baptized as children are ready to make a public profession of faith and accept the responsibility of life in the church (sometimes called ‘confirmation’), the session shall provide an opportunity for them to do so. They are to be instructed in the faith, examined by the session, received as active members, and presented to the congregation in public worship. At this time, they reaffirm the vows of Baptism by renouncing evil and affirming their reliance on God’s grace, professing their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and declaring their intent to participate actively and responsibly in the worship, life, governance, and mission of the church.” (W-4.0203)

The Confirmation curriculum we are using this year is called “Big God. Big Questions.” It is based on the four questions that will be asked on Confirmation Sunday, May 7:

1. Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?
2. Who is your Lord and Savior?
3. Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?
4. Will you devote yourself to the church’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

When we gather for worship on Confirmation Sunday, May 7, our confirmands will be asked these four questions as they renew the covenant promises their parents claimed for them at their baptisms and as they make their own public professions of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But the Confirmation service in three months is not just for these young people. The last line of that formal description of Confirmation in the *Book of Order* says, “On such occasions, it is fitting for all worshipers to reaffirm the baptismal covenant.”

Confirmation Sunday will be something of a “covenant renewal” ceremony, when we will be reminded of the promises God has made to us, of the promises claimed for

us by others, and of the promises we make to God when we choose to live for God. In some ways, what we will do on Confirmation Sunday is akin to the covenant renewal ceremonies we read about in the Old Testament. For example, when the children of Israel had entered the Promised Land, their leader, Joshua, just before his death, gathered “all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers, and all the people” and reminded them of everything God had done for them: God made a covenant with Abraham; God gave the land to Jacob and Isaac; God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt; and God delivered them from their enemies and led them into the Promised Land.

After Joshua reminded the people of all of God’s promises and all that God had done for them, he said, “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. . . Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” And all God’s people said, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. . . Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” (Joshua 24:14-18)

Joshua’s speech before his death sounds a lot like his predecessor’s speech that we heard from today. Near the end of his life, Moses gathered all the people and reminded them of everything God had done for them. Then Moses put the choice before the people: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. . . 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.” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20a)

The scripture lesson from Deuteronomy 30 presents the choice in clear, unambiguous, black-and-white terms. The choice is between life and death, good and evil, blessing and curse, the one God and the many gods. We may remember our own professions of faith in Jesus Christ, when we made that choice for God. However, if we see our decision for God and his ways in Jesus Christ as a one-time decision, way back then, we run the risk of ignoring the challenges to our faith which we face every day. We are surrounded by temptations daily to compromise our beliefs, to accommodate our faith. It doesn’t seem too melodramatic, then, to suggest that each of us does face a life or death decision every day: whether to live our lives going after the gods of this world or to live our lives in obedience to the God who says to us, “Choose life!”

The book of Deuteronomy as a whole serves as Moses’s farewell speech to the Israelites. For forty years he had led God’s people, out of bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea to escape Pharaoh’s army, in the wilderness where the people murmured and grumbled against Moses and God, to the mountain where God made his covenant with his people. Now, Moses has assembled the people on the edge of the Promised Land, just east of the Jordan River. Moses knew he wouldn’t be crossing the river into the Promised Land.

His final task as their leader was to remind them of what God had done for them. The lives of those people had been, were, and would continue to be determined by their relationship to the one God who had led them out of slavery to this point in their history. Egypt was forty years in the rear-view mirror. Life in the Promised Land was still ahead, after much struggle and many challenges. The time for decision is now, Moses told God's people. Through Moses, God laid out the choice for the people: life or death, good or evil, blessing or curse. It's up to the people to decide! God is not impartial in this case. He wants the people to choose life – that is, to choose God's ways as they enter the Promised Land. But the life or death decision is theirs to make.

Maybe some of God's people standing there by the Jordan River that day shouted out, "That's too hard! We don't know what to do! We don't understand what it means to choose God, to choose life!" But Moses told them, "It's not too hard. You know what God wants you to do. God has told you what it means to choose God, to choose life!"

Each day we are faced with the same choice the Israelites had on the banks of the Jordan River – life or death, good or evil, blessing or curse. It's been said that to "choose life" is to "practice life." That's why baptism isn't a one-and-done event in your life of faith. That's why Confirmation Sunday isn't a one-time event in your faith journey. That's why every time we baptize someone in this church, you are asked to remember your baptismal vows and God's promises. That's why, on Confirmation Sunday, you will be asked to reaffirm your baptismal covenant.

When we think, "But it's too hard! We don't know what God wants us to do! We don't know what it means to choose life, to choose God!" Scripture reminds us, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved." (Romans 10:8-10)

In the Star Wars movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker's X-wing Starfighter crashes into a swamp. As Luke and the Jedi Master Yoda look at the crashed aircraft, Yoda tells Luke to raise his fighter from the swamp by using the Force. When Luke half-heartedly and maybe skeptically says, "I'll try," Yoda points his finger at Luke and says, "No! Try not! Do or do not! There is no try!" There was a lot at stake for Luke Skywalker and the choice was clear.

So it is with our journey of faith and our relationship with God. One writer points out how Moses sums up what it means to "choose life" with two sets of three ideas: to love God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments, statutes, and judgments and to love God, to hear God's voice, and to cling to God. He writes, "The two triads form a beautiful synopsis of life. To love God with our whole selves. To follow God's voice as we walk. To cling to God by keeping God's commandments. This is the way to life, not death."¹

If you've ever filled out an online survey or taken part in an online poll or if you remember filling in the answer bubbles on standardized tests in school, you are familiar with what is known as a "forced-choice question." Examples of a forced-choice

question are yes/no, true/false, multiple choice, picking one image out of many, awarding a star or a thumbs up/thumbs down, or rank ordering your preferences. According to questionpro.com, “A forced-choice question does not have options like ‘Can’t say,’ or ‘Don’t know,’ ‘Neutral,’ or ‘Maybe.’ Respondents cannot offer any neutral answers.”²

Moses, Joshua, Jesus, the apostle Paul, the Scriptures themselves – they all pose a “forced-choice question” when it comes to our relationship with God – life and death, blessing and curse. We don’t have the option of “Can’t say,” or “Don’t know,” “Neutral,” or “Maybe.” In his 1967 book *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*, Harvey Cox, retired Harvard Divinity School professor, wrote, “Somewhere deep down we know that in the final analysis we do decide things and that even our decisions to let someone else decide are really our decisions.”³ You may recognize the quote in its more familiar form: “Not to decide is to decide.”

Moses would agree with that. So would Joshua, Jesus, and the apostle Paul. As believers, the time to decide is not just when you’re baptized (if as a teen or an adult) or on Confirmation Day. Instead, the time to decide is every day. Who and what will guide and shape my life today? In whom will I entrust my entire life? How will I live in such a way that I serve and glorify God in all that I do?

Of course, if we follow Yoda’s advice to Luke – “Try not! Do or do not! There is no try!” – we know that when we do, we don’t always get it right. Which is why the gospel is such good news – we live by faith, not by sight. We are saved by grace through faith – the gift of God – for good works in this life. When we choose God, when we choose life, when we love God, when we follow God’s ways, we discover a new life. One writer puts it this way: “To ‘choose life’ in this moment does not mean to have accomplished anything or to have finished anything. Choosing life means starting something: living in a messy, difficult, and holy relationship with God. Covenant fidelity is a set of lived practices, an ongoing orientation toward the love of God and neighbor. Moses did not ask (*sic*) the people simply to check off the correct box; Moses asked them (*sic*) to turn their whole lives toward God. . . (This) requires regular reminders about that choice, even regular moments of re-choosing, re-committing, re-orienting, re-turning – re-orienting our lives in community to the service of God alone.”⁴

I wrote a quote in my quote journal that I heard in an interview on National Public Radio several years ago: “If it’s not life or death, it’s not life or death.” That’s a good reminder when life starts to overwhelm you and the stress is building up. That’s a good reminder to prioritize.

But it’s also a good reminder that our relationship with God and, therefore, our relationship with our neighbor, is a matter of life and death. Let us hope and pray that when we are faced with the choice for God, our answer won’t be “Can’t say,” or “Don’t know,” or “Neutral,” or “Maybe.”

May our answer always be, “We will serve the Lord, for he is our God. We choose life!”

Let us pray: Our one true God, we are pulled in many directions. Many duties, tasks, commitments, and enticements lay claim to our lives. This day, in this place, let love for you and service to you, our God, be our choice. This day, in this place, may we open our hearts and spirits to you, our one true God, that we may love you with all our hearts, souls, strength, and minds. Blessed be you, O God of creation, who has called us here. Praise be to you, O God our Redeemer, who sustains and nurtures our lives. Amen.

NOTES

¹Tyler Mayfield, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 30:15-20,” at www.workingpreacher.org.

² “Forced-Choice Question: What It Is + Guide with Examples,” at www.questionpro.com.

³Harvey G. Cox, *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*(New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), viii.

⁴Cameron B. R. Howard, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 30:15-20,” February 12, 2017 at www.workingpreacher.org.