

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

The man had been a smoker pretty much all of his life. It's not as if he hadn't tried to quit. At times he had promised his wife he would stop smoking, but he never kept his promises for long. But now it was decision time. He was sitting in the doctor's office. His doctor said, "I'm going to put it to you bluntly. If you choose to keep smoking, you will die."

When people are given the choice of life or death, it's easy to say, "I choose life." But when choosing life means giving up smoking, or drinking, or drugs for good, many discover that they simply are not able to choose life in that way.

When Moses told the Children of Israel to choose life over death, you can be certain that no one was wanting death over life. But choosing life, Moses pointed out, was not simply putting an X in the correct box. Choosing life was walking in the ways of God and holding fast to Him.

When Lutheran confirmands kneel at the altar, they're putting an X in the correct box. "I choose life," they declare to all within the church, and especially to God. But choosing life over death is not a simple decision made on the day of one's confirmation. It's a way of life that flows from faith. And most confirmands discover fairly quickly that choosing life in this way is not as easy as they thought.

The Israelites who entered Canaan with Joshua did honor God with their lives. They did walk in His ways. But their children and grandchildren did not. It is certainly not the case that they simply decided to put an X in the "I choose death" box. It's rather that their way of life was the way of death over life, evil over good, curse over blessing.

The average person on the street is not going to say, "I would rather perish than go to heaven." Only one in ten thousand might say that, and only because that one is trying to be difficult. But when you observe how most people live, even Christians, you find a contradiction in what they say and what they do. They may choose life with their words, but not with their actions.

Now when Moses said, "choose life," we need to consider his audience. Who was he speaking to? He did not say the words, "choose life," to all the nations around Israel. He spoke these words only to God's chosen people. It would have been utter foolishness for Moses to have gone out to a people who were not of God--the Moabites, or the Amorites, or the Edomites--and said to them, "Choose life. Walk in the ways of God and hold fast to Him." No one can choose God and come to Him by their own reason or strength. The only ones who can choose God, choose life, are those who have already been chosen by Him. At birth we are only able to choose death. We are worse than the addict who is controlled by his addiction and simply cannot choose to stop. Dead people cannot choose life, and everyone is born dead in sin.

But God chose life for you in His Son. It was no accident. It was not by chance. God chose you in Christ before this earth was even created. And in your baptism, the life in Christ He chose for you, was given to you. You are the ones, therefore, Moses speaks to when he says, "choose life."

But choosing life is a struggle, It's a struggle each day because choosing life is something we must do each and every day. When you got up this morning, you made the choice for life because you put church as your top priority. But if I sit in the pew and do not listen, or listen but do not apply the words to myself, I am choosing death over life. Tomorrow you choose life by making God's Word a part of your day. Reading His words and meditating on them is the way of life over death. But your

flesh, your Old Adam, as well as mine, wants no part of God's Word, and will push you to choose death over life. Fighting against temptation this week is choosing life. Giving in to sin, what our flesh wants, by slandering my neighbor, lusting in my heart, disobeying father and mother, is choosing death over life.

The words, "choose life," are, simply put, a call to return to our baptism. We do not have the power to resist sin and choose life, but that power is in your baptism. We do not have the power to make God's Word our top priority on Sundays and through the week and thus choose life, but that power is in your baptism. In baptism your Old Adam was drowned and died with all sin and evil lusts, and the new man of Christ came to live within you. Your life began in your baptism where God raised you to life with Jesus. Every day when you rise from your bed, you choose life by returning to your baptism--remembering that sin has no power over you, remembering that Christ is now your Master, and He who lives in you is stronger than any temptation that comes your way.

Even though Jesus is stronger than sin and death, He gave in to them on the cross. You see, Jesus chose death for Himself so that you might have life. Jesus chose to accept the punishment that was laid upon Him--punishment for your sin and mine. Jesus chose to close His eyes in death so that you can close your eyes each night in peace and confidence. And Jesus did this for everyone...even for you. He chose to die for those who struggle with their flesh. He chose to die for sinners like us who keep choosing death over life. And because Jesus died for you, God forgives you. Not because you choose life so well. God forgives you for Jesus' sake precisely because so often we choose the way of death. And in God's word of forgiveness there is life for you, real life in Jesus.

Jesus chose to die for that man in our story who could not stop smoking. He came to see me one day in my office. This was years ago in another state. He was a mess. He came with his wife who was a Christian, but he was not. He could not stop smoking, or drinking, and he also struggled with illegal drugs. He was certain that he did not have long to live. He wanted to hear about Jesus. For two weeks I was given the privilege of filling that man's ears with the good news of his Savior--the same good news you hear right here in church. He never left my office without tears in his eyes. He had such joy over what Jesus had done for him even though he was a worthless, weak sinner. He was baptized with his wife looking on; she now had tears in her eyes. And not a week later that man died. His body just gave out. But he died confessing his Savior. All his life that man had chosen the way of death. But that man is in heaven today because God chose life for him in Jesus Christ.

Choosing life is all about Jesus. You are baptized into Him. He lives in you. His words are here for you. His Supper is on the altar for you to receive--real forgiveness for you. Through these things God gives you life, the life that will never come to an end even when you close your eyes in death. As Moses put these words before God's people many years ago, so now God puts them before you: "choose life." And with the hymnwriter we say, "*Jesus, priceless treasure, Fount of purest pleasure...Jesus is my choice.*" Amen.