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## Choosing Life

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener  
Proper 18 – Year C

One Labor Day when I was in my early 20s, I spent an entire morning driving around the outskirts of Nashville, TN. I was trying to find the airport after spending the holiday weekend with some friends in Western Kentucky. Needless to say, this was before GPS. I had a map, but I am terrible with maps. I am also proud and don't always find it easy to ask for help. Did I mention that I am terrible with maps? I tried following those road signs, the ones with the little planes on them that point you towards the airport—I tried to follow those, but to no avail. A sign would appear, and I'd think, *Yes! Victory is mine!* And I'd drive in the direction of the sign for a few miles, only to discover that I was now on a completely different interstate. I must have circled the city three or four times until, finally, worried I was going to miss my flight, I did the sensible thing, the thing most people would have done right from the start. I stopped at a gas station to ask for directions. A kind soul who overheard me talking happened to be heading the same way and agreed to let me follow her. We'd have to hurry, but there was still time for me to get back on track.

The people in our reading from Deuteronomy this morning aren't in danger of missing a flight; they do, however, need some help getting back on track. The ancient Hebrews have been journeying through the wilderness for longer than anyone can remember. They have taken lots of wrong turns, and not only in a geographical sense. Most of their wanderings, in fact, have been wanderings of the heart, dislocations of the spirit. Once, you may recall, when their leader Moses leaves them for a few days to go spend some time with God up on Mt. Sinai, the people get anxious and try to soothe their frazzled nerves by partying like it's 1999—B.C. When Moses returns, everybody's down there in the valley gyrating on the dance floor. Right in the middle of all the action, underneath the disco ball, is a golden calf fashioned out of the melted down rings all the newly engaged girls in the crowd don't like but have to wear because they belonged to their fiancée's great grandmother. The whole thing is a veritable carnival of unfaithfulness. The people move on from it eventually, with God's help, but the temptation to make idols—to put in the place of God something that is not God—the temptation to make idols remains strong. Sometimes—many times—they cannot resist it.

Which brings us to this morning's reading. At first glance, the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy appears to be addressed to these same folks who danced around that golden calf. Most biblical scholars believe, though, that it was actually composed for a later generation whose capacity to stray from God's path rivals those of their forebears, so much so that it lands them in exile. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"<sup>[1]</sup> they wonder as they lament this latest wrong turn. *How do we continue as God's people having messed up so badly? How can we go on living in such anguish and turmoil? Is there hope for the future, or should we just give up?*

To which the reply comes, *Heck no!* That's verse 19. A more literal translation would read, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Or, like I said, *Heck no! Heck no, don't you give up! God's offering you another chance.* Which is just incredible, really, when you think about it. I mean, here the ancient Hebrews are, having strayed from God's path again and again and again; they've been given more chances than Little Bunny Foo Foo, and still they keep getting it wrong. Here they are being given yet another opportunity to change course and follow the path of light and life. Why? Not because of any merit on their part, but because of God—because of God and God's relentless love.

It's hard to imagine a more hopeful story for us today.

Hopeful because it reminds us that our past need not determine our future and that ours is a God of second

and third and fourth and 400th chances. It's hard to imagine a more hopeful story for us, and yet it's hard to imagine a more challenging one, either. Because the reality is that choosing life is not always as easy as it might seem. Indeed, what is actually quite simple—frighteningly simple, in fact—is mistaking the ways of death for the ways of life. Thinking you have found God only to realize you're worshipping an idol. Maybe not one in the form of a golden calf, but an idol nonetheless.

In 1969, shortly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Wilmington, North Carolina erupted in violence. Snipers ran around shooting at random, stores in poor Black neighborhoods were set on fire. In the midst of all the pain, horror, and confusion, local television crews interviewed the Chair of the local Board of County Commissioners. "Dr. Hooper," they asked, "what have you learned from these terrible events?" To which Dr. Hooper responded, "I learned that the county needs to buy six more riot guns."<sup>[2]</sup>

It is not always immediately clear which paths will move us towards life and which will prove to be just another wrong turn, a move in the direction of death. And yet the author of Deuteronomy reassures God's people that we can find our way. "The word is very near you," he says. "It is in your heart and in your mouth so that you can do it."<sup>[3]</sup> In essence, *You know the road, beloved. You know the road.* You know it in your heart when you wake up in the middle of the night wondering what on earth is going to become of this country and of our planet so why not just squeeze what you can out of life, pursuing money and power and your own pleasure above all else? But then, almost in rhythm with the beating of your heart, those ancient words echo, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.* You can feel this in your heart when you get still enough to pay attention.

You can feel it on your lips, too, as you pass by the man on the street corner near your office, the one hunched over the cart full of dirty clothes and empty soda cans; the one who, whenever you see him, you find yourself inadvertently making a bunch of assumptions—things like, *If only he'd get a job or get a shower or get off drugs.* Interspersed with these thoughts, though, is a sentence you first heard in Sunday School years ago: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

All of which makes for a very difficult path to trod, this path down which God calls us. It is a bumpy path, a narrow path, a path filled with lots of twists and what may appear, initially, to be dead ends. But it is the path that leads us home. And it is never too late to get on it, not even after you've made a million wrong turns. Amen.

<sup>[1]</sup> Psalm 137: 4

<sup>[2]</sup> Story recounted by Bill Dols in *Just Because It Didn't Happen: Sermons and Prayers as Stories*, published by Myers Park Baptist Church, 2001.

<sup>[3]</sup> Deuteronomy 30: 14