

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 - February 16, 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Zombies have been in the news lately. You probably would never have thought that I'd start a sermon by talking about Zombies, but Zombies are very much a part of our discussion today. I think we know what Zombies are. They've been around in fiction and at the movies for over a century. Growing up, more than a few of us watched movies like "Night of the Living Dead" and its sequels. Today, of course, you can tune in on cable to see the latest episode of the "Walking Dead" and follow the adventures of a small group of human beings who for some reason have not been affected by a mysterious virus that has turned most of the human race into Zombies. The big question week to week is whether the Zombies will destroy the humans before the humans destroy each other.

Zombies are, or were, human beings who are little more than animated corpses. Their minds, souls, spirits — whatever it is that makes them human beings — are gone. All that remains is a creature that can do little more than eat and destroy. Zombies serve no useful purpose. They appear to be alive, I guess, but what they are doing hardly constitutes living. They look like human beings, but there is nothing remotely human about them.

Nearly 40 years ago, the Philadelphia group The Hooters released a song called "All You Zombies." It references Moses and Noah, people who heard God and took action, as opposed to most people who also heard God but chose to do nothing. The last stanza warns that doing nothing in life is not an option. Choosing death has its consequences: "All you zombies show your faces, / All you people in the street, / All you sittin' in high places, / It's all gonna fall on you!"

There are many Zombies among us today. No, I don't mean the ones we see in the movies or on TV. I mean there are Zombies, millions of Zombies, all around us. It is both realistic and sad to say Zombies are people who look like us, people who walk and talk and eat and work, but do nothing but simply go through the motions of life. They are Zombies because while they appear to be alive, they are not really living.

Alive but not living? How can that be?

Friends, I expect we know more than a few people, friends, family, co-workers, etc. who simply pretend to live their lives. They live primarily or entirely for having the nicest this or the best that. They send their children to fancy schools and camps and claim they love them even as they argue with their children's teachers or even their children's bosses about how badly the children are being treated. Of course, we all know it's not about the children, it's about the Zombie parent's foolish ideas about life and status and how things are supposed to look to outsiders. We know that the real losers are the children because they never learn how to live life for themselves.

Zombies, today's real Zombies, are people just like us who have surrendered their ability to think and act for themselves. Instead, they favor of a view of life that embraces the idea that, "He who has the most toys when they die, wins." Let us be clear, we do all know people like that. In fact, if we are to be honest with ourselves, there is even a bit of Zombie inside all of us.

Indeed, how many of us have really taken the time to look at our lives and ask ourselves what our we are all about and what we are living for? I'm not trying to be gloomy or accusatory. But life, at least from a religious perspective, is not about simply going through the motions of eating, drinking, shopping, raising children, and getting together with friends and family. Undoubtedly, we all do some of those things simply because we have to. None of can reflect all the time on what we say and what we do so it is easier to go along with the crowd: think what they think, buy what they buy, act how they act, live how they live. That's what I mean by saying there's a bit of Zombie in all of us.

However, just because we cannot possibly reflect on every moment of every day on the things we do, say, and believe, does not mean we cannot sometimes take the time to look inward and examine ourselves. As we approach the season of Lent, we need to start asking ourselves the difficult question of why we are doing what we are doing. I agree, the process of self-examination and self-reflection is challenging and can even be dangerous and fearsome. It is something many of us avoid completely because really looking at ourselves, looking at our lives, looking at the choices we have made in the past, looking at what we have or have not done during our time on this earth — all this self reflection may yield answers we will not want to deal with. In other words, it can be far, far, easier to choose to be a Zombie today and every day as opposed to refusing to live as Zombies do but instead, choosing life.

Choosing life. Over three thousand years ago, Moses encouraged the people of Israel to choose life by following the Lord God who brought them out of Egypt, gave them the Ten Commandments, provided for them in the wilderness for forty years, and was about to lead them into the Promised Land. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, from where our scripture is taken, is a kind of summation of what, in God's view, defines what human life is supposed to be about. I know there are a few passages that we question nowadays, but if you take the time to read all of it, you'll find that Deuteronomy is a book that fundamentally places human beings into a permanent and fulfilling relationship with God, with our community, and even with ourselves. If you want to know how we should live while on this earth, look at Deuteronomy for some excellent answers.

Moses offered his people two alternatives: life or death. He made it clear that the Israelites could choose to reject life and follow a path that ignored what God had done for them and the framework for living God gave them. The Israelites could simply enter the Promised Land and just merge with the people they found there — act like them, talk like them, worship like them, and just go along

because it would be much, much easier. In short, Moses asked Israel to Choose Life with God, or choose a Zombie-like deathly existence separated from God.

God still offers us the same choice today. Every day, every hour of our time on earth, we have the opportunity to Choose Life with God or Death apart from God. The choice, is very, very real.

What is life? What is death? Life and death are, at the very basic level of course, aspects of the condition of our physical bodies. We eat, we breathe, we move about — all good signs that we are “alive.” When our bodies do not move, our hearts are stopped, our brains are not functioning — yes, that probably means we are “dead.” But is that all there is to life and death? Is that what living and dying is all about?

What does it mean to be alive, really alive? From a Christian perspective, life is not about health or wealth or how many friends you have or what you look like or what status you may have in the community. For thousands of years, we have used such things to measure how “good” or “bad” our lives are. Let’s look at them:

Some say that life is measured by how physically healthy we are or our physical appearance. So-called “beautiful” people, so-called “athletic” people are said to be alive because of the condition of their bodies. Their being alive is defined by a society — us — that worships physical appearance. Look at how many magazines feature people with beautiful bodies on their covers. Look at how many TV shows glorify youth, tanned skin, muscles, and other body parts I don’t need to mention.

But I ask, what happens to such people after a few years? They lose their good looks, they lose their muscle tone, they start looking like, quite frankly, you and me. Now some of these people have used their appearance and athletic abilities to do far more than simply glorify themselves or make themselves available for parties. But most, alas, have defined their lives mostly on what they look like on the outside so when the outside appearance fades away, their lives are essentially over. They are Zombies. They were always Zombies.

What about wealth? What about power? We have allowed, as a nation, the top one percent of our population, some 3-million people, control something like half the wealth in this country. Moreover, we have structured our tax system to insure that this top one percent pays far, far less of their income proportionately to government and gives to nonprofit organizations than we do. Did you know that as a percentage of income, the people who give the most to churches and nonprofits are those who live in the poorest communities? Remember the story Jesus told of the widow who gave everything she had while the richest gave only from what they had left over? It’s still very true today.

Yet, once again, we obviously worship the wealthy and the powerful and give them the very false idea they are the ones who are truly alive in this world. But I ask, how many people at the top of the

heap came by their wealth honestly? How many are paid a lot of money to compensate for the illegal and immoral things they have to do? How many truly worked, truly earned, and therefore truly deserve what they have? How many are where they are because their parents were rich or they happened to choose the right investment at the right time? Is that life? Is that living? Day after day after day we learn of how wealthy and powerful people use their wealth and power simply to enrich themselves and avoid justice, buy favors for themselves, and exploit other people. Tell me, is that life? Is having access to power truly living? Is the enhanced ability to promote injustice and to make life miserable for people who have less than they do really what this world is about? Or, in fact, are these people for the most part even more death-filled Zombies whom we again choose to worship?

What about popularity? Does having lots of “friends” proof of being alive? Well, perhaps, but I wonder how many of our friends will be there for us not just in the fun times but in the bad times as well. Are our relationships genuine, deep and caring? Or is our socializing empty and devoid of real meaning? Are we just Zombies going with our Zombie friends to Zombie parties?

Choose Life! Choose Life! Moses urged the Israelites to choose to make their time on earth mean something. Life is not about doing what we can for ourselves. No. Life is about making the world a better place for others. Life is meaningful and enriching and spirit-filled not when we put ourselves first, not when we mindlessly follow the crowds, not when we boast about how much we have or where we've been. Instead we should aim to deliberately work and think and act to discover our gifts and abilities. We should strive to deliberately work and think and pray to God to help us understand our individual missions in life. Because when we embrace the notion that we are happiest and most satisfied when we put others before ourselves while not hurting ourselves, then we are no longer Zombies, we are truly Alive!

Now to be sure, the story of the Bible is all about the struggles Israel had, and by extension, the constant struggles we all have in choosing between life and death. Sometimes they were on board with God and God's guidance, just like us. And often they did what they wanted, just like us.

But in Jesus, we have the model of a human being who always lived in accordance with God's Law and is therefore the best example for our lives and living. Can we be like Jesus all the time? Of course not, that is why we need to make confession at the start of our time of worship. But as Moses urged the Israelites, as Jesus reminds us, we can try again, we can be forgiven, and we can gradually shed our Zombie-like worship of death and instead choose meaningful, fulfilling, genuine Life! Choose. Chose. Choose. Choose Life!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.