

Today at both churches Susan Whitlow, a member of Trinity, preached the following sermon. Susan was recently licensed by the Diocese of Virginia for three years, as a Lay Preacher for both churches.

Susan worked in Seminary administration and as a professional church musician for her career. Susan has attended church all her life, first in the Baptist Church and then in the Episcopal Church. Susan has taught adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in both the Baptist and Episcopal churches. While living in North Carolina, Susan completed EFM, Education for Ministry, a three-year program of study that is likened to seminary education for lay people. After completing the course, Susan then served for two years as a leader/teacher of EFM at her church in North Carolina. I am delighted to have Susan, and soon her husband Dave, join me in the preaching ministry at our churches! I was fed by Susan's sermon today and appreciate her thoughtful approach to the passage from Deuteronomy.

Megan

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Moses said, "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.

If you were at the annual parish meeting a couple of weeks ago or if you read the Friday Check-In, you know that the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia has licensed Dave and me to preach. I tell you that not to allay your fears, but rather to shift the blame. It's kind of like the Commonwealth of Virginia licensing 16-year-olds to drive a car. Neither one is a good idea.

Dave and I don't have any academic degrees that could qualify us to preach. I'll let him justify himself in a couple of weeks, but you'll probably hear me say from time to time, "I think ..." or "It seems to me ..." and that's about it as far as my citations or credentials go.

Scripture, on the other hand, has a great deal of authority. The Old Testament reading for today, for example, is from Deuteronomy, meaning "second law." (You see that in the first syllable, like "deuce" or "duet.") It is largely a list of rules and regulations, written to reinforce the Ten Commandments, and other requirements that God gave to Moses generations before. It's not meant to be a page turner, which is probably why the Common Lectionary doesn't go to it very often. It would be like taking the Code of Virginia on vacation with you for your beach read.

It speaks to learning the laws and teaching them to the next generation, and stresses that this is necessary because the people of Judah have entered into a covenant relationship with God. God freed them from slavery and protected them in the wilderness, and their proper role is to love and obey God.

The problem was, by and large these weren't the same individuals. They hadn't been enslaved. They hadn't been saved from starvation by manna that fell from heaven. It was their ancestors. God's do's and don'ts fall on the ears of people who have become a bit ... well, complacent. That's why they need a second law.

But laws are hard! They make us do things we don't want to do and don't let us do things we do want to do. If we follow them. More often, we must confess that "we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us."

Plus, we tend to think of the giver of those laws as, at best, a scold, not someone loveable. The so-called God of the Old Testament, especially, has the reputation of being punitive when the Israelites mess up. No matter how hard they tried to be good, bad things kept happening!

What did God mean by keeping the commandments? How did God want them to do it? Well, Moses said, "Walk in God's ways."

What are God's ways? Are they just mysteries, too deep to fathom? Are we destined just to "understand it better by and by"? Did the Hebrews, God's chosen people, ever figure it out?

As I see it, it wasn't that God chose the people; God chose to love the people. So, when Moses says to walk in God's ways, he's saying that God's ways choose love. And this passage we read today from Deuteronomy, the second law, is all about choosing. "I have set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity ... blessings and curses. Choose life."

One of my favorite children's books is *Liza Lou and the Yeller Belly Swamp* by Mercer Mayer. It tells the story of a little girl whose mother sends her out on a series of errands, each of which puts her in danger. Her villains include the sly swamp devil, the wicked swamp witch, and the slithery gobbledygook. With each mission, the mother gives a warning: Apple Dumpling, be careful; Sugar Plum, mind you be most particular; Honey Child, you watch your Ps and Qs. The narrator says, "Now Liza Lou took good advice when she got it," and so, she figures out how to defeat her foes.

I think God is a lot like Liza Lou's mother. This passage from Deuteronomy has some Honey Childs in it. God isn't threatening curses; God is cautioning against them.

As much as we tend to see the God of the Old Testament as mean and stern, and the God of the New Testament as kind and loving, here God has chosen to extend grace to the people of Israel. And the covenant relationship requires that they obey God by choosing to extend grace to one another. That's God's primary commandment.

Love God, love one another. Sounds pretty New Testament to me.

Today's passage from Matthew says to seek reconciliation with the person who has wronged you, not judgment; practice self-control and restraint, not gratification and indulgence. Grace. The only snag is, it's harder to show grace than it is to follow laws! How does Jesus want us to do that?

Deuteronomy of all places, the second law book, gives direction. Listen to the couple of verses that precede today's selection. They are beautiful and passionate, and breathe enthusiasm into today's text.

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut. 30:11-14)

A few weeks ago I was at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond with about 250 others. Among us were maybe a couple dozen people who lived in what is commonly called “the projects.” Some of them admitted that they had been on “both sides of a gun.” There was an elderly woman who sat on her Rollator, except when she stood to be heard, which was often. She was a force! She could best be described as a wizened crone, straight out of central casting. And true to her character, she was full of wisdom. My take-away from what she said is this: every day you have a Chance and a Choice. If you make a bad choice, tomorrow you have another chance! And another choice. Choose life. (She didn’t say this part, but God did.)

Her speech sounds aspirational, and it is, but it didn’t come from aspiration alone. It also came from experience: poor health, crime, and poverty. Her curses are not gobbledygooks.

Neither are ours. Each day we face the threat of illness, the loss of loved ones, fear of the future. Even war and pestilence (think Ukraine and COVID) are ever present, not to mention natural disasters like earthquakes. I don’t think these are curses from God. I think they’re just what it’s like to live on “this fragile earth, our island home.” We can learn the lessons of Liza Lou and Moses. Take good advice when we get it. Walk in God’s ways.