

Epiphany 6A
February 16, 2020
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-27

CHOICES

In the film **INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE**, adventuring archeologist Indiana Jones, played by Harrison Ford, and his father Henry, played by Sean Connery, end up on a quest for the Holy Grail—the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper.

The quest leads them through all sorts of challenges in all sorts of places with all sorts of adversaries (including Nazis, of course), until at last, armed with fresh clues about the Grail that had been hidden for centuries, they locate its hiding place in a remote Middle Eastern desert canyon.

Arriving there on the heels of their nefarious competitors, they must pass through a series of lethal hazards in order to enter the cave where the Grail has been safeguarded for a thousand years.

But when, at last, they reach that place Jones and his rivals are confronted not with ONE holy cup, but SCORES of them, they discover that it is up to them to choose—and that the choice they make will have grave consequences.

The right choice will lead to life immortal. The wrong choice will lead to death—and not just any death but the kind of horrible special effects death Hollywood loves inflicting on bad guys in these kinds of movies.

Well, sure enough, the bad guy goes first, and, no surprise, discovers he has chosen poorly...and we know what that means.

Following his grisly demise, it's Indiana's turn. He makes his choice, and by choosing wisely he's able to both save the life of his dying father and escape the crumbling fortress to live for another day.

Choices have consequences. Is that as familiar a phrase in your home as it is in ours?

Poised at the boundary of the Promised Land after 40 long years of wilderness wandering, Moses addresses the people of Israel one last time in our lesson from Deuteronomy.

Standing at the border of a land he himself will never enter, Moses distills all that God has been trying to teach them into these final words.

I CALL HEAVEN AND EARTH TO WITNESS AGAINST YOU TODAY, Moses tells them, THAT I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU LIFE AND DEATH, BLESSINGS AND CURSES. CHOOSE LIFE!

With such stark choices so clearly labeled you'd think choosing LIFE would be a "NO-BRAINER!"

But anyone who knows the story of God's people knows that fickle minds, short memories, and a stubborn habit of not trusting God's promises has made this desert journey much longer and harder than it ever had to be.

Truth be told, the same thing might be said about us.

I've been doing some life-review as of late and in that review I haven't always liked what I've found. It seems the same kinds of issues keep cropping up for me in life's curriculum, which means that, when it comes to those things, I'm a remedial learner.

**It took the Hebrew children 40 years to graduate from the Wilderness School.
But after 60 years I'm still at it.**

So when I hear Moses' voice in Deuteronomy alongside Jesus' voice in Matthew—cutting out loopholes and sharpening up expectations along with the consequences that follow—it can be easy for me to wonder if I'm ever going to get this right!

Along life's way things get complicated. And it's not always as easy to make the right choice as it may first appear.

And we are a nation of choosers:

- Grande or venti
- Decaf or regular
- Carb or protein
- Urban or rural
- Paper or plastic (well, hopefully not plastic...)

Having choices—an ever-increasing range of them—has become part of parcel of the American dream. Choices give us a sense of autonomy and support the notion that we are, in fact, in charge of our own destiny. Freedom of CHOICE is pretty high up there in the American pantheon.

But you have to admit that having so many choices can feel less like a dream at times and more like a nightmare.

Too many choices can be paralyzing and can set us to wondering: What will I miss out on if I choose A over B? Y over Z?

The rise of digital culture has only exacerbated the problem.

These days, before you buy anything you can read scores of reviews by others who've purchased the product (or at least PRESENT themselves as persons who've purchased the product!)

But how do you weigh a review written by someone you've never met and with whom you may have nothing in common other than a desire for a new pair of shoes? Among scores of reviewers, whose voice rings truest—and how do you know?

On my iMac at home I have over 100,000 digital photos, and between her laptop and the cloud, Chris probably has another 100,000 more.

A huge percentage of these digital photos capture (with slight variations) the very same scene.

A wild guess is that 60% or more of them should be deleted. But how do you choose?

Snapping a picture has never been easier, but the process of discerning which ones to keep takes more time and energy than it ever did when you sent in your roll of film for processing and had to live with whatever showed up when the pictures came back.

With so many choices open to us in so many areas of our lives, FOMO syndrome—FEAR OF MISSING OUT—can take a big bite out of the pleasure that simpler choices once afforded us. With so many choices, how can you be certain you've made the right one?

Moses, in no uncertain terms, says it loud and clear: Folks, you're heading into new territory now, and you'll face choices you've never had to face before now. God has shown you how to tell the difference between right and wrong; God has shown you the difference between living for community and living for yourself. The choice is yours. One road leads to life and the other to death.

Which one will it be?

In our gospel Jesus embraces an even sharper understanding of choices and consequences when he tells the crowd: YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID...BUT I SAY TO YOU...

He challenges his listeners to listen to the song beneath the words; the spirit that lies at the heart of what God is after—which, in every example he gives today, has one common denominator: relationship.

ONE EXAMPLE:

When you are offering your gift at the altar, Jesus says, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.

At the heart of the Torah, says Jesus, is God's concern for relationship—God's relationship with you and your relationship with each other. In all your comings and goings and doings, God expects you to honor both. For anything that divides you from another, any conflict that tears apart relationships, is deathly.

From the get-go Jesus' message and method are all about creating community. And his teachings here in the Sermon on the Mount are a revelation of what life in this new community can be.

CHOOSE RELATIONSHIP! Jesus says, choose life!

This option of choosing relationship is placed before us every day, in every encounter we have with another human being, whether family member, friend, colleague or stranger. Living in community with each other is no easy task. There are so many things that work to separate and divide us.

Yet, even when that happens, there is a way back. Come, says Jesus, and meet me at the Table. Take what I give you here and find yourself beginning anew; knit together through one bread into one body, forgiven and renewed, sent to show the world where the life that truly is life can be found.

Life is chockful of choices. And we don't always get them right. But the God revealed to us in Jesus is a God of second chances, who showed us in Jesus that even death is not the final word.

When we put our trust in him—then no matter what shape our journey has taken, no matter how many times we've messed up, no matter how many poor choices we've made, we can still live with hope. COME TO ME, he invites us, all you who are burdened and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Thanks be to God!

Amen.