

**Sermon: February 12, 2023 – Deuteronomy 30: 11-30**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley**

**CHOOSE LIFE.**

For folks my age and a bit younger, these words may evoke an immediate visual image from the year 1984: George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley, better known as the pop duo WHAM!, dancing and singing their infectious ear-worm hit, “Wake me up before you Go-Go.”

I remember being a bit confused by this video at the time. I instantly recognized the solemn, beautiful Biblical reference from Deuteronomy and then there’s this cheery bit of fluff with two attractive young men wearing CHOOSE LIFE t-shirts bouncing around the stage.

Apparently I’m not the only one who was a bit confused. If you want to drop into a smug and at times vitriolic online, check out a forum where the meaning of CHOOSE LIFE in 1984 gets discussed. Some recall CHOOSE LIFE as already well-established as a slogan used by the pro-life movement, while others are just as certain that the shirt was a sign of solidarity for the LGBTQ community as it suffered through so many lives lost to AIDS.

For what it’s worth, the T-shirt designer, Katherine Hamnett, is well known for her socially conscious T-shirts, including this one, and when you put them side by side a bigger picture appears: CHOOSE LIFE as part of a group of T-shirts including Educate – Not Missiles; Ban Pollution; Stop Killing Whales; and Save the World. Later additions to the collection include Knowledge is Power; Choose Hope; Climate Action; and Make Trouble – Question Everything.

This visual array presents it well: CHOOSE LIFE in the mid 1980s – and I’d say this still applies today - is a choice adjacent to other choices that impact not only my life but the greater common good. And in case I don’t say it at any other time today, choice is often complex – not just a choice between a and b, but a series of nuanced choices that lead to other subtle choices. So let’s put all this aside for the moment, on my imaginary reference shelf, to look at later. And again, we come back to those two simple words, CHOOSE LIFE.

This time, another pop culture reference presents itself. This one is not quite so well known as the WHAM! Music video and it’s a whole lot more cynical, but amongst a number of adults a decade or two younger than me, these words are enduring and influential (or at least, when doing an internet search for “choose life” it’s what came up at the top-of-page, each time).

At the start of the 1996 movie Trainspotting, following the 1993 novel of the same name by Irvine Welsh, a nihilistic, heroin-addicted narrator named Renton lists off a whole bunch of upper-middle-class virtues – “Choose life. Choose a job...Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments... Choose leisurewear and matching luggage... Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing [junk food] into your mouth” and after enumerating all those choices, concludes by saying “I chose not to choose life. I chose something else” and then tells his grim story.

There’s a lot going on here, and an important truth: in the world today these words, CHOOSE LIFE, often travel with a whole bunch of social baggage. Renton quite correctly states that CHOOSE LIFE often gets reduced to merely “living a secure and settled life” (Sion Evans) and the reality is, the more resources one has – good housing, good education, good income, with bonus points for gender, sexual identity and ethnicity – the more one has the ability to choose.

The easier life is and the more choices that are available, the choices made might be very, very shallow; for those with fewer options, the choices may be limited and grim.

So that I also put on our “shelf to be looked at later”: the nature of choice, and the connection between choice and wealth. Are we OK living in a world divided into those who can afford to make choices, and those so busy just surviving that the ability to CHOOSE LIFE is a luxury reserved for rich folks?

And once again, we meet up with those words, CHOOSE LIFE.

In the land of Moab, Moses (Deut. 29 and 30) spoke to his people, recounting all that God had done in delivering them from Egypt and training them into obedience through forty years in the wilderness. Moses spoke of divine judgment against idolatry, and warned of what would happen to subsequent generations if they slid into such ways. Moses outlined the blessings that would land on Israel if it obeyed G-d, and the curses awaiting those who opposed them. And then he said this (with masculine pronouns intentionally left intact): “the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, <sup>10</sup> when you obey the LORD your G-d by observing his commandments and decrees.... <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your G-d, obeying and holding fast to [G-d], 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, then, in this original setting, was about blessings and curses. To choose life was to choose fidelity to God, and any other choice would have brutal and long-lasting consequences. Yes, God gives us the ability to choose and that is a great and gracious thing, but at the same time there is also a heavy dose of “choose this – or else.”

My unease with this prompted me to wonder how this might be regarded within a Jewish context. It’s always challenging for me to engage a passage of Hebrew Scripture that Jewish scholars and believers hold in many different ways, as I find it hard to know what’s behind their arguments - the full religious and political positions that shape what is being expressed. I found this when looking for Jewish interpretations of Deuteronomy 30, which range from “we have allowed our hearts to stray and troubles have ensued” to “choosing life in this moment is to assert our G-d given dominion over the Holy Land.” So I do not pretend that the quote I’m going to share is a majority opinion, but only that it spoke something I think I needed to hear.

Self-described as an author, artist and activist, Rabbi Elliot Kukla writes, “When the Torah states that God puts life and death before us, our tradition is not telling us to decide whether to live or die, but that every choice we make from birth to death matters. These choices range from how we treat our loved ones to how we spend money; from whom we bring into our world view, to how we choose our food. In each of these choices, we should choose life.

“But what then does it mean to ‘choose life?’ What is it about each of these seemingly small decisions that warrants the weightiness of life and death?

“As I see it”, continues Rabbi Elliot, “the answer lies in the impact each choice has on all other beings on the planet....Our choices affect not only ourselves, but life on a global level—when we choose to drive less, spend less, and consume less, we are choosing life. And we choose life each time we lift our voices to advocate for civil rights or environmental protection.

“Disasters on a global scale highlight the impact for the planet of human choices that don’t affirm life. ...Poverty and low labor standards are leading more people than ever before to live in flood plains or in areas prone to landslides, especially in the Global South [and the] global imbalance of wealth created by human economic decisions greatly affect the scale of disasters”.

So that’s the final “take” on these words, CHOOSE LIFE, that I will put (albeit briefly) on that little shelf of wisdom. Quoting Rabbi Elliot Kukla, “Every choice we make from birth to death matters; in each of these choices, we should choose life.”

We have, then, much wisdom to consider, as we re-engage these three approaches to the holy challenge to CHOOSE LIFE.

There’s that first thought, that the commandment to CHOOSE LIFE stands alongside all of the ways we are called to live life in ways benefitting the greater common good. Many of the choices that are best for all of us may well not be the easiest and most lucrative for me personally, and that needs to be taken seriously, especially when I consider the ways that my lifestyle and livelihood impact the health of the planet and the agency of all living beings. To truly CHOOSE LIFE will, of necessity, include what AA calls a “searching and fearless moral inventory” of my choices and society’s choices, how our choices impact first peoples and neighbours and life on this planet.

And while it may not exactly fit here, it needs to be said that even in its original context, a troubling aspect of this scripture is that part of the reward being offered to the people, if they are obedient to God and do not stray off into idolatrous ways, is a gift of land that already had someone on it. I can’t hear that as someone living on Treaty 7 lands, or as someone who has seen first hand the Separation Wall that makes life so challenging for Palestinians, without it giving me pause. As I decide what it means to CHOOSE LIFE, this is an issue that needs to be engaged.

When I revisit the second thought we came across, I am reminded of how easy it is for a well-off North American to celebrate these words, CHOOSE LIFE, without realizing how much the number of choices truly available to a person are related to wealth and social standing.

Though the words were spoken from a position of deep cynicism, the list we heard earlier from the Renton character in *Trainspotting* weren’t wrong. When one is scuffling to keep the bailiff away from the door, “choosing life” is a luxury. As many of you know, my late brother worked for 35 years as an Occupational Hygienist, and in his work he saw the worst of it: people working in extreme heat with friable asbestos and toxic solvents in the air, minimal air circulation and marginal masking, and, most likely, inadequate training on how to stay safe. But so many of the workers were limited in the kind of work they could get, mostly by education, sometimes by language, and at times by flat-out racism. Their bosses could afford to CHOOSE LIFE but for those doing the physical labour their choices were much more limited. For some of these inequities, there’s not much to do but lament, but it’s something to be aware of as an Affirming Ministry: as a congregation that strives to be life-affirming in relation to all people, class assumptions can easily get intermingled with our good intentions.

And then, returning to our wisdom shelf a third time, there’s those words of Rabbi Elliot Kukla, “Every choice we make from birth to death matters; in each of these choices, we should choose life.” As we considered earlier in the service, in the Moment of Quiet Reflection before the scripture was read [see endnote], each of us have CHOOSE LIFE moments, big

and little, that have been pivotal in our being here, alive, this day. We also CHOOSE LIFE over and over again, not just for ourselves but for all living beings and the earth itself, in choosing how big a carbon footprint we're comfortable creating, and how our life-choices impact the lives of others. We CHOOSE LIFE when our choices support people with limited options to have greater agency, to make their own choices. God sets before us, each day, the opportunity to embrace and enable life in all its fullness. Those choices will always be respectful of my neighbour, and in making those choices, I will also honour God.

Friends, in big ways and small ways, this day and this week and in the big choices of our lives, God invites us: CHOOSE LIFE. Amen.

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And... here is the "Moment of Quiet Reflection", earlier in the service:

Today's scripture lesson is the passage from Deuteronomy in which the people are urged to CHOOSE LIFE.

In each of our life's stories, there are times when we have personally and specifically needed to CHOOSE LIFE. Sometimes we knew it at the time, other times it is often in hindsight that we see the immensity of choosing one path over another.

What are the CHOOSE LIFE moments in your life?

Do these words bring back memories of critical, in the moment decisions? – stepping back from rage, handing your keys to a friend and taking a cab, recognizing imminent danger?

Does CHOOSE LIFE speak to a bigger personal choice: leaving a soul-destroying relationship, getting more physically active, seeking counselling, changing careers?

Has CHOOSING LIFE guided other kinds of decisions? - getting involved in activism or voluntarism in order to address injustice, opening yourself to new sources of wisdom, changing your buying patterns to use less and re-use more?

In a moment of silence, I invite you to offer God a little prayer, about a time or times when you have chosen life and it made a difference.... Amen.