

February 12, 2017
6th Sunday after Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Some would say they were quite unlikely leaders. After all, it was the year 1961 in Hampton, Virginia. And the three of them were women - black women, all working for NASA. Their names were Katherine Goble, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan. Daily, they faced decisions about whether to choose or refuse life.

The choices reflected the reality of their own unique personal situations. And their choices reflected the reality of the time, place, and wider social culture in which they lived. 1961 in the southern United States. A time of peril, promise, and possibility. A time of life and death, blessing and curse, bondage and freedom still being aborn. Over and over these three women chose life. They chose life by recognizing their own unique God-given gifts and talents. They chose life when they offered those gifts of intellect and personality with confidence, yet in humility and vulnerability, to a world that paid little or no attention to them, a world that just couldn't believe they had anything special to offer. These three women did not allow injustice to stop them from being fully themselves and fully alive as people – as women of color. They chose life when they refused to cower or become paralyzed with fear. They chose life by refusing to become violent or vengeful, by not retaliating when they were treated like second class citizens – separate and unequal. They chose life when they stood up and spoke truth to power. And because it was so crucial to their well-being and their very survival, they chose life when they did not go it alone – when they reached out for and relied on the support of family, friends, and church. They chose life when they recognized and seized opportunities before them to grow and learn, opportunities that allowed them to contribute to the common good and to a greater cause beyond themselves and their individual contributions. In the face of great adversity, they persisted, and chose life, over and over and over again. If you have not yet seen the movie “Hidden Figures”, I highly commend it for your viewing and reflection, and encourage your sharing and discussion about it with others.

In today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, we are taken back to an early and important time of transition in our faith history. This portion of the story focuses on the people of Israel and their leader Moses. Moses has been dealing with questions of his own mortality. What words of wisdom will he leave with them, perhaps words that might even be etched on his tombstone when that time comes? He knows that very soon he is going to die. The Israelites are at the Jordan River about to enter the promised land, but Moses will not be going with them. He is reminiscing about all the peaks and valleys they have faced. He wants to tell his people once more how to live a good life. Moses wants them to hear what he is saying and take it to heart. He reminds them of what they have been through as a people: slavery in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, receiving God's commandments, wandering in the wilderness some forty years. There on the edge of the promised land, Moses lays out the two ways between which Israel must decide: "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." Choose life. L'chaim – To Life! *(and maybe under his breath Moses even murmurs) – "and please try not to mess it up".*

It seems significant that in this his farewell sermon, the only sin Moses explicitly mentions to the Israelites is the sin of idolatry – that is worshiping anything, giving allegiance to anything other than the Creator God, embracing any thought or action that does not reflect the just and merciful nature of Almighty God. It is this holy One with whom they have been called into a binding covenant relationship. They have in effect been wed to God, their Deliverer, the author of their salvation. Their ways of being in the world are not just about them – their own opinions and beliefs and habits. Their words and actions reveal who they think God is and who God calls them to be. It was true for the Israelites, and it is also true for us. Our words and actions reveal our theology, show who we think God is, who God is for us.

We are such a long time removed from that major turning point for the people of Israel about to enter the promised land. We don't tend to think of the decisions of our daily lives as nearly so momentous. Few of us get up in the morning thinking about whether

we will choose life or death today. We just don't label our experiences in that way – as presenting us with a choice between life and death. Many, if not most of our choices seem pretty mundane and not all that important.

But maybe we need to rethink this, because we too are bound in a covenant relationship with God, the Lord of life. Our thoughts, words, and actions do reveal who we believe God is, and who we are in relationship to God. Life and death really are before us every day. Our decisions, our words and actions matter a great deal. It is very possible for us to choose death, because that is what we do when we ignore God and choose anything inferior. “Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter.”

The call to choose life is a lifelong learning process, and it is sometimes learned only in the midst of struggle. And there is yet one other important detail in this Deuteronomy passage: Moses' farewell sermon concludes in an open-ended way. We're not told in the record of Deuteronomy how the Israelites responded to Moses' sermon. So, the choice of life always remains an option, just as it was for every individual person and every group who makes up our spiritual family tree, our ancestors in faith, the great cloud of witnesses who surround us.

So let's think about how, on a daily basis, we are invited to choose rather than refuse life. There are some basics. Loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. Fighting for justice. Caring for the hurting. Sharing what we have with those who are poor, hungry, homeless, and vulnerable. And treating others the way we would want to be treated.

In addition, there are a rich variety of ways each day that we can do the sacred and holy thing and choose life. Here are some practices we may not have considered that are ways we choose, rather than refuse life.

- Playing with children.
- Laughing often, long, and loud.
- Crying whenever we need to cry.

- Being present, and letting others cry when they need to cry.
- Being patient with our own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others.
- Yielding to another driver.
- Walking around the block where we live.
- Being the first to say “hello” when we encounter someone we don’t know.
- Turning off the television.
- Taking a hiatus from social media.
- Inviting a stranger to lunch or dinner.
- Stop doing what is not worth our time.
- Learning things we have told ourselves we would never learn.
- Doing a task so someone else will not have to.
- Cease from arguing.
- Apologizing to someone, even if it was mostly his fault.
- Forgiving someone, even if we think she does not deserve it.
- Having patience.
- Stop having patience when it is time to speak the truth.
- Worshiping with all our heart.
- Praying genuinely, trustingly.
- Believing that God loves you and me.
- Looking for Christ in the people around us.
- Sharing God’s love with someone who has forgotten it.
- Delighting in God’s good gifts.
- Saying a sincere “thank you”.
- Opening our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Searching for something deeper and better than our own comfort.
- Tending lovingly to an important relationship.
- Giving more than is required from a generous, grateful, and gracious heart.

Poet and theologian, modern-day mystic and prophet Edwina Gately writes in one of her poems:

“We are called to say yes
That the kingdom might break through
To renew and to transform
our dark and groping world.

We are called to say yes
That black may sing with white
And pledge peace and healing
For the hatred of the past.

We are called to say yes
That nations might gather
And dance one great movement
For the joy of humankind.

We are called to say yes
To a God who still holds fast
To the vision of the Kingdom
For a trembling world of pain.

We are called to say yes
To this God who reaches out
And asks us to share
This amazing dream of love.”

Here then is today’s call to discipleship: to stop and ask ourselves each day – “Is what I am about to say and what I am about to do something that would be recognizable as life-giving, life-upholding, life-empowering? Will it reflect who God is for me?”

Friends, let’s pray to be empowered and emboldened to choose life. Let us raise the cup of our lives in thanks, and in faith, hope, and love to God the giver of all life.
L’chaim – “to life!”. Blessed be the Holy One.

Amen.