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Epiphany 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Choose Life!”

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Forty years. For forty years they had no place to call home. For forty years they lived in tents. For forty years they wandered in the harsh and barren wilderness. For forty years they ate the manna which God provided and they collected each morning. Some 14,600 days ago they had left Egypt, and now they were on the border of the Promised Land - on the cusp of everything changing. Of having a place to settle and call their home. A time to rest.

They had been here before. It was not God’s plan that they spend forty years in the wilderness. That had come about because they disbelieved and mistrusted their God. The first time they got to the border of the Promised Land they looked in, at the people already living there, and did not believe that God could give them that land. The people were too big. They were too strong. Or to put that another way: God wasn’t big or strong enough. Their hearts wavered in fear and doubt.

So God spent the next forty years proving that He was. Big enough and strong enough. Those who would not believe Him or trust Him would not enter the Land - they died in the wilderness. But their children would go in. Their children who ate the manna, the bread of God, all their lives. Their children for whom God provided water from rocks. Their children whose clothes and shoes did not wear out even after forty years of wear and tear. Their children whom God had protected and watched over and led in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar fire by night for some 14,600 days.

Those children now gathered around Moses by the Jordan, across from the Land they would very soon now enter and receive. And Moses preached the Word of God to them. They would hear the same words their parents heard and rejected. And so, Moses says, don’t do what they did. Don’t make the same mistake they did. He said, as we heard today: ***Choose life. Love the Lord your God and walk in His ways . . . and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Choose life.***

Choose life. It sounds so easy, doesn’t it? But it’s not so easy, is it? When our troubles are so big and so right here, and God seems so far away. When what the world is telling us about life and where to find it and how to get it is quite different than what God says. When it seems like by all appearances, maybe the world is right and God is maybe wrong. And then maybe there are those times when we think we are choosing life and start down that

tunnel, only to find the oncoming train of death.

That's what happened to the parents of those now gathered around Moses on the border of the Promised Land. They thought they were choosing life by not entering that Land filled with big, powerful people and nations. They thought they were choosing life by weighing what they saw against the Word of God and choosing to believe what they saw and felt over what they heard. They thought they were choosing life by not going into that land and sure and certain death. *But they were wrong.*

And sometimes, so are we. We make the same mistake. *If* we rely on our own wisdom, our own thinking; what we see with our eyes and what feels right in our hearts. We can so easily be drawn away . . .

And it starts so little. The words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel today spoke of big sins - murder and adultery and divorce and sexual immorality and false oaths. But no one starts out to do those things. They start little, and grow . . . They start in the heart and what our hearts are drawn to; what they desire and crave and thirst for. And maybe some of those desires are good, but some not so good. But even the good ones can become not good, if they begin to take on a life of their own and begin to take over our lives.

For then desires of our hearts then make their way to our minds, where we begin to think about them and turn them over and consider them, and after a while maybe move on to how we can get what our heart desires. And maybe how we can get it and make the getting look harmless, or even good and right. Thinking that this is going to give me life or make my life better and more satisfying. We begin then to plot and plan, we excuse and justify. The seed of sin, planted in the mind by the heart, begins to grow.

Then the desires and thoughts are put into words and actions, and the sinful fruit is plucked. And what started as a small desire ended up not so small at all.

And so, Jesus says, you've heard about murder, but murder starts with a little seed of hate and anger and bitterness of heart. You've heard about adultery and divorce, but those things start with the little seed of lust and grow. You've heard about false oaths, but those great, big, vehement, insistent swearings start out as little lies. The sin is here [heart] first.

So how do you stop it? Well, you could deal with the words and deeds. Jesus talks about that. Better, He says, to reconcile than to be thrown into prison. Better to cut off your hands and pluck out your eyes than to be thrown into hell. Better to rely on God's promises to you rather than your swearing on Him. Those are all better, and the magnitude of what Jesus is saying there should make us stop and consider what we are doing each day.

But they're not the answer. Because if you followed through on what Jesus said, there wouldn't be any you left! And still, too, the sinful thoughts of the mind and the desires of heart remain. Life-stealing sin isn't so easily tamed. If sin starts here [heart], then the answer

starts here, too.

Choose life, Moses had said. Don't do what your parents did. Don't make the same mistake they did. For, Moses said, ***if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them . . . you shall surely perish.*** For Moses, too, you see, sin starts in the turning of the heart and grows out from there. On the border of the Promised Land before, a little bit of fear *first* grew into a lot of mistrust and disbelief, and *then* into wrong deeds. And so choosing life doesn't just mean following the commandments and doing all the right things. It is deeper than that. The answer is in the heart. And if it's in the heart, then the answer is in the Word of God and the worship of God. To remain in them.

So ***if your heart turns away***, if your heart keeps turning to the things of this world; if you find yourself listening more to the word of the world than the word of God; ***if your heart turns away*** and you are being ***drawn away to worship other gods and serve them*** - and those other gods are anything or anyone in your life that takes priority over the one true God; if you find yourself doubting whether God is big enough or strong enough or caring enough for your problems, like Israel - *don't perish*, Moses is saying! Don't keep down that path. **Choose life**. Choose life by repenting of all that, of turning away from God - and instead turn away from all that, and receiving the heart-cleansing forgiveness of God. For that's what the Word and worship of God are all about.

That's why God gave Israel the Tabernacle while they were wandering for forty years in the wilderness. There He would speak and they would receive. There He would give and they would receive. There were the sacrifices that pointed to the sacrifice that would cleanse their hearts and take away their sin. And so there was life even in the wilderness. Whatever they needed, He provided, physically and spiritually. They needed life and He gave life.

And that's why God gave you not a Tabernacle, but a Church. For your life, however wilderness-y or not it may be. That just as He brought Israel through the waters of the Red Sea, so He brings you through the waters of Holy Baptism. That just as He fed Israel with manna, so He feeds you with the Body and Blood of His Son. That just as He gave Israel water from a rock, so He give you the living water of His Spirit. That He speak to you through His Word and preaching, and no more sacrifices - that was done on the altar of the cross. There the blood of Jesus shed there to cleanse you, wash you, forgive you. *Life* you and your heart. Jesus come to die in our wilderness so that you might live in His Promised Land. Jesus come to descend with you into your grave, so that you might rise and ascend with Him into His kingdom. The life you need, the life He gives. That you not perish, but have life.

And *then* from that cleansing of the heart grows new desires, new thoughts, and then new words and deeds. A new life. For Jesus reconciled you, so no hell for you. That's off the table. Jesus gave His body parts on the cross so that you could keep yours. And you are His Bride whom He will never divorce. He kept His promise - made right after Adam and Eve

made their very bad mistrustful and disbelieving decision - a promise repeated down through the ages, finally fulfilled in Jesus, and now given to you. A promise of life. A new life to live.

So *choose life*, Moses says, to you, the new Israel. Repent of the old, live in the new. The new desires, new thoughts, new words, and new deeds of the Spirit who lives in you. That may not always be easy - the problems in your life, the troubles in the world, the responsibilities that you have pulling in you all sorts of different directions, things never slowing down, always getting more complicated, news reports always predicting the worst - maybe you find yourself like old Israel, looking at what looks too many, too big, too much, and too strong. . . . *Well it is!* It was for Israel, and it is for you. But not for Christ.

So at just such moments, look at the cross, and see your Saviour there. When you're feeling overwhelmed, when you're feeling overburdened, when you're feeling hopeless and despair. And then look at the empty tomb. And see His victory. That it wasn't too many, too big, too much, and too strong for Him. The enemy couldn't win. Death couldn't win. Life won. And He won for you.

So to choose life, as Moses said, means not to choose yourself, what you can do, what you can accomplish, your strength, but to look to the author of life, the giver of life, the Redeemer of life - **to look to Jesus and rely on Him**. When the doubts and fears come, don't let them grow - look at Him. When the anger and hate and bitterness begin to rise up in your hearts - look at Him. When the lust begins to tug - look at Him. When the despair - look to Him. Look to Him, the giver of life. Given and shed for you. Given to you. For life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.