

“Choosing Our Way”  
Joshua 24:14-18; 1 Cor 12:4-12;  
Matthew 6:24; 19:16-26

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We have been on a trajectory where we started thinking about the world and its uncertainty and the chaotic nature of it, then we realized that there's also a bounding of all that. So in some ways we live in this chaotic bounded system we call the world and there are certain risks. We talked about it being a little risky, this business we call life. We are going to continue now to think about what it means to live in that kind of place. What does it mean to perhaps have choice?

There's a story in scripture, starting a little before the pieces we read today. It is a story of a family. There are two boys and their father, and they are working a small landholding. In the process of living together, the younger one gets tired of always being on the short end, of being at the low end of the hierarchy. He begins to think, “If I just went somewhere else—the big city, perhaps—I could make my fortune and I wouldn't be stuck doing all this labor for my father.”

As he thinks more about that he begins to think, “It would be great to get to the city and get a new start, but it sure would be nice if I had some resources to help me out along the way. It's hard to get started all on your own.” So he starts bugging his father. “I need to go out and earn my fortune. Is there any way you could help me?” The father isn't really excited about this. He feels his son is too young. He doesn't want him to go out yet.

Finally, the son comes up with an idea. “I know—if I ask for my inheritance, that will be the way to do it.” This goes on for a long time. He keeps bugging his father over and over and over again. Finally he decides he's just going to have to go on his own. Just as he's ready to go out the door, his father says, “Here it is.” Perhaps you know the rest of the story, if you have read the story of the prodigal son who takes off with his inheritance to go make his fortune, or whatever.

The reason I think about that story again, is because it feels like Jesus is telling this story of choices made that have real consequences. As I begin to think about choices, it feels to me like the scripture suggests there are real choices to be made. Think about our own lives. As you have lived through your life, you have made various choices. I know the choices I made. When I was back in high school in Iowa, I never expected that I would end up in Idaho. Nor did I expect to be up here preaching. But the choices I made along the way have led to a particular place at a particular time. They have consequences.

We all have choices, right? I feel like I've been told over and over again that choices are really a mirage. You don't really have choices; you are just the result of all the physical forces in the universe. Or, on the other side, God has made all the decisions and everything is going to happen that way. There are times where I have felt a little like a ping pong ball. The ping pong ball doesn't really have a choice about what's going to happen to it. It reacts because there is a force applied, and its own nature, deformities, etc. If I were really good at hitting the ball I could do it for a long time and the ball would do the same thing every time I hit it. It is all really dependent upon the force upon it.

There are a lot of ways in which I feel like our culture tells me I'm just a product of all the forces around me or the forces that are coming at me today. And, I'm not really that much different than a ping pong ball. I've always chaffed at that. I don't like the idea that I'm just a ping pong ball. I've always tried to understand how it could be different. So the idea of looking at a world that is kind of chaotic but yet bounded as the place that God has given us to live this out began to help me see how God could be sovereign, create a world that God is in charge of—there are all kinds of boundaries on it—but within that, also give us the opportunity to have real choices that matter.

At the same time I think I've seen science move to a point where they have begun to recognize that there are complex systems that begin to affect the constituent parts. It's not all just the forces; it's how the system reacts to those forces. That's who we are. We're systems.

I'm beginning to think we have real choices, and I think it's scriptural, Biblical. Look at the Old Testament reading today, where we hear Joshua say in front of all these people, "You have to decide today who you are going to follow." He's saying, "You have a choice." Of course Joshua makes that famous statement: As for me and my house, we will follow the Lord. He makes a choice.

In the psalm we read today, it's all about how if we are humble enough to hear God's word, to allow him to teach us, he will teach us the way to choose, the way to go.

So I don't have to feel just like a ping pong ball. There are times where I certainly do, but we have real choices. God invites us to be humble enough to listen. Isn't that really what Jesus is directing us to as well? We have choices.

The only issue with having choices is that if we have a choice, there may be some responsibility that goes along with it. Or, if we have a choice, there may be some consequence to that choice, which I truly believe there are. It's not always easy to want to think we have choices because we might recognize how complex this world is and that we have to make a choice in the middle of it. We might think about complexity, unknowns in the future. How do we make a choice into something we don't fully know? There's a fear that if I make this choice, I'll lose out on that choice or that way of going. If I make this choice, how does it constrain my life? So we make all these choices and what do we do with them? How do we choose?

I think one way we do it is we begin to constrict things a little bit. We are pattern people; we make patterns. We decide that there are certain kinds of things we don't want to do. I'm a rural person. I don't want to live in the city. That makes a whole bunch of choices easy. If it takes me to the city, I don't have to choose to do it. We begin to make those kinds of sweeping constraints around our world so we can narrow things down and make it easier to choose.

Of course, society tells us all the time what are good things to choose as well. Advertising has gotten pretty sophisticated trying to help us choose what we're going to do. Jesus, I

think, is speaking into this nature of our choosing. How do we begin to shape our lives? What are the things that we begin to use to decide our life with?

Something I think is easy to use is the definitions of success. One of those has always been wealth. If we begin to shape our world around wanting to be wealthy, it begins to be what's central to us. I think that in the middle of choice, we will begin to find those things that help us choose or that guide us in our choosing.

What does God suggest? The best place to come to find the way to choose is with God. God continually comes to us and invites us to make choices and to listen to the choices he would lead us to make. That's what the psalm is about. That's what Jesus is doing here, inviting this young ruler to choose what he would do. He wanted to know the real fullness of life, to get to the end of things, to become perfect. How to do that? Choose to follow Jesus and find the way he would lead us.

Last week we heard him talk about leading us to abundant life. If we want to live well, what do we use as definitions? God has spoken a lot into our lives about what it means to speak well. Jesus goes through a list here of some of these. We don't have to have a world without boundaries. We can begin to structure it by the nature of the God we know, who would lead us into a life that is full, well-lived.

Inviting us to come around the table is part of this invitation. He is inviting us to recognize where we are sustained and where we get the vision and the guidance for living. Sometimes it seems we run up against things that seem impossible, or we've made mistakes, or we're not sure we can ever make the right decision. I love what Jesus says at the very end of the passage. What seems impossible for humans is not with God. For God, all things are possible.

We are always given that opportunity to choose to come and let God change our lives, to take the impossible and reshape it into something possible.

We have lots of choices to make and they matter a lot. God invites us to recognize we don't have to make those choices alone, but as we follow Christ and listen to God's teaching we are guided and given direction. We can go on the road that he would take us on: the road to a life well-lived, an abundant life.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, this world is an interesting place, full of uncertainties, boundaries, and choices. We recognize the risk. Lord, it reminds us how important it is to come to you and to allow you to begin to work with us and in us, to sustain us and guide us. We give you thanks for coming to us, entering into our lives, sending Christ that we might recognize your presence with us and be invited along the way of Christ. Lord, help us trust that you are and will be with us and guide us in the midst of the struggles of our lives. Help us remember the teaching you have already given us and the grace you share with us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.