

## Sermons at St. Luke's

*A sermon preached by The Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, February 13, 2011.*

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because of the sub-headline given the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, by those who put together the King James version 400 years ago, many have mistakenly thought Moses was the author. He wasn't, as is perhaps apparent from the description of his death and burial, but they are indeed books of Moses. Take Moses out of the story and we likely wouldn't be gathered in this parish church this morning. We can connect those dots another time, and it would be fun, but let's stick with Moses for now, as the lesson we just heard from Deuteronomy is from Moses' last sermon, his farewell address to the community in exile.

Moses told them they had a choice, to obey the commandments of the Lord God, to love God and walk in his ways, and hold fast to him or to be led astray and bow down before other gods and serve them. Choose A and you get to live a good long life in the land of milk and honey across the Jordan. Choose B and you won't, you'll perish. That's clear enough. In the alternative Old Testament lesson for today, from Ecclesiasticus, we are asked to choose between fire and water, between life and death. That's not ambiguous either.

As our parents, teachers, pastors, and probation officers have told us, life is just full of choices. Fast ball or curve ball? You want fries with that? I remember the year the Durham Bulls opened on Good Friday. It was hard, but I managed not to see the lads play until Easter afternoon.

We have choices because we have free will. Freedom of necessity includes the freedom to make dreadful mistakes, and to do the right thing. God will always be there for us, but nowhere in Scripture is there a divine promise to kiss it and make it well. Just think for a moment of everything you have learned from mistakes. Maybe God is onto something in letting us make wrong choices. Maybe our parents weren't as dumb as we thought.

Not all choices we face are of the life or death variety Moses put before the exile Hebrew community in the Sinai. You find a wallet in a parking lot. It has \$400 cash in it, as well as the owner's ID. Of course you return the wallet with the driver's license. But you're unemployed, maybe even homeless. Do you return the \$400 cash? All of it? as Ted Koppel said some years ago in his Duke graduation address, they are the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions.

A friend or coworker tells an absolutely tasteless joke about Jews. Do you laugh politely, try to ignore it, say what you really think, or what? There are choices to be made.

Nelson Mandela gets out of prison after 27 years. Does he cry out for vengeance and violence, or for forgiveness and reconciliation? We know of course the tack this great gentle man took, and thank God he chose the hard right rather than the easy wrong. As Matthew notes in the Gospel today, be reconciled to your brother.

A recovering alcoholic, out of town and on business, is offered a drink at a reception. Why not? Well every recovering alcoholic can tell you why not. But that choice is there, one day at a time. That's why they make white chips. Slip up, and you pick up a white chip at AA and keep on going, one day at a time.

The same fellow is out of town, maybe in Vegas, where what happens stays there. His wife isn't with him, but he runs into an old flame. Lead me not into temptation, but he's already there. What to do? Nobody will know. Not true. He will know. A choice to he made, to be made in light of his marriage vows. Some of you may remember in 1976 when he was running for President, Jimmy Carter allowed himself to be interviewed in Playboy and quoted the Gospel today about lusting in his heart. He was elected anyway, probably because nobody believed him.

A child, your own teenage daughter, is brutally murdered. They catch the guy, and the State of Alabama is seeking the death penalty. You have a choice to make. Do you cheerlead for his execution? Jack

Durant, a deacon in this diocese, didn't. He testified at the penalty phase of the trial and asked the jury not to impose the death penalty on another parent's child, and they heard him. 'The fellow will be in prison for life, which seems long enough.' You might say that Jack tempered justice with mercy, as John Paul II did when he was shot.

Continuing in the pro-life area, a college freshman is pregnant. If I may digress for a moment, I remember years ago a gathering at which somebody asked "Did you hear Sally Sue got herself pregnant?" What I remember was my grandmother's response, "All by herself?" My grandmother was a wise woman, and I don't say that just because she taught me how to keep score in baseball. To return to Sally Sue in her dorm room, a pregnancy was decidedly not in her game plan, but you know what? There are lots of couples with fertility issues who would love to adopt a baby. That's not to say the choice is an easy one at all, but there is a choice to be made. May she make it after lots of prayer, thought, and good counsel.

A young Christian pastor, younger than any here, single but very much in love, devoted to his parish flock, is approached quietly by an old family friend. He is asked to help murder someone. You got to be kidding right? But the young pastor signed on as a member of the murder conspiracy. You see, the pastor was Dietrich Bonhoefer, the

friend who solicited him was Klaus von Stauffenburg, and the intended murder target was Hitler. It almost worked, but instead it cost them their lives. Bonhoefer made his choice, knowing it is wrong to kill, but. There were a lot of buts in that choice.

The four chaplains, middle aged men all, in the torpedoed and sinking USS Dorchester in the North Atlantic in 1943, had a choice. No one would have thought worse of them had they not made the choice they made. Each of them took off his own life jacket and gave it, along with his seat in the lifeboat, to young sailors and soldiers who had none, "Take it son, I've had my fun, and God go with you." They made a choice.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest, could have just kept his mouth shut that day at Auschwitz. One of the guests had tried to escape. As an object lesson for the others, the Nazi overseers selected ten men at random to be put in the starvation bunker, without food or water, to remain until they died. One who was selected cried out that he had a wife and young children. Father Kolbe could have kept his mouth shut, but he made a choice. He spoke up and said "Take me instead" and they did. Days later, he was the only one still alive and the Nazis were tired of waiting, so they gave him a hefty IV dose of carbolic acid, and he was gone, but only from this world. Greater love hath no man.

There are less noticeable and obvious illustrations of this choice we are all confronted with, right here and now in this parish church. No one has to teach Sunday School. We don't even have to have a Sunday School, and no one is compelled to teach. They make that choice though, and this is a better place for it. No one, not even Kaye's daughter, is made to sing in the choir, nor is there any church law that says we even have to have a choir. Can you imagine St. Luke's without all the wonderful music though? All those folks made a choice, to practice and to sing, and yes indeed there is a Christmas CD available. We hope some too will make the choice to audition down at the ballpark on February 26 at 1000 to sing the national anthem at Durham Bulls games this season, a nice advertisement for St. Luke's.

Nobody is forced to serve on the parish vestry, and I remind the candidates each year that if elected they have to go to the meetings. Thanks be to God though, folks do make the choice to serve in a critical capacity, for we have to have a vestry.

No one is compelled to make coffee, to greet newcomers, or to assist in the pastoral care of the sick, the lonely, the dying and bereaved, the newly born and their parents. Folks make the choice to do these things.

No one, not even Jan Lamb, has to go to Belize year in and year out, in service to Holy Cross School there. All who go, and many do, make that free choice, a choice of some expense too.

No one here has to serve as an usher, or to count and record the offering each Sunday. For that matter no one has to contribute a dime here. We don't charge admission at the door. We ask only that you leave your guns at the door, as Johnny Cash cautions us, and come and worship, for all are welcome.

No one has to volunteer to drive for the Interfaith Hospitality Network. The operative word is volunteer. We are free to make that choice. Thankfully some do, though I am told not enough.

Not one of the folks, young and older, who serve as acolytes here are required to do so. They make that choice, though truth be known there is occasional evidence, circumstantial to be sure, of parental coercion. It works nicely, as Anne trusts me to work closely with them. How was I supposed to know that the young acolyte for whom I made an airplane out of the church bulletin one Sunday would actually fly it during the sermon? I may be a priest, but I'm not clairvoyant. That acolyte, now in college I might add, made a choice.

No one has to put in hours of keeping the buildings and grounds up here. No one has to decorate the tree at Christmas. No one has to

serve on the altar guild or change light bulbs, or change and charge the batteries in the mikes, or tinker with the computers or work hours on end on the dynamic plan for a green church, or serve as a Lay Eucharistic Visitor, taking the Sacrament to the sick and homebound on Sunday. All of that is voluntary. Every one of those persons made a free choice, thanks be to God.

Try to imagine St. Luke's without all these folks I have mentioned, and others, making the choices they have made and continually make. Try to imagine the world without those more dramatic choices we have talked about, some anonymous, others well known.

As Moses tells us in Deuteronomy, part of the Holy Scripture of our Jewish brothers and sisters, and our Hebrew ancestors, including Christ himself, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today...chose life...loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him." May each of us continue to choose freely to love and to serve, thanks be to God.

Amen

St. Luke's

13 February 2011