

This week our nation is observing Independence Day, when the early settlers of our land, apart from the natives, declared their independence from the British, whose rule was becoming increasingly hard for the people to bear. We revolted largely because we wanted our independence; we did not like having a nation from across the sea taxing us and telling us what to do. Hard choices were made, families were broken, and many lost their lives in what became known as the Revolutionary War. From 1776 on, we would make our *own* decisions and come up with our own set of values and laws. America, the land of the free, was shaped and born to grow into a powerful nation.

Long before anything having to do with North American territory was recorded, God decided to make a specific people, later known as Jews, to be God’s chosen ones. God worked first through Abraham, then, hundreds of years later, through Moses after the people had become slaves in Egypt. God heard the cries of the people and delivered them, over a rough period of forty years, to the edge of the land God had long-before promised to give to Abraham’s descendants.

In the midst of those forty years and many failings by the people to trust or obey God, God gave the people rules, including the Ten Commandments, to show them how to BE a holy people who belonged to a Holy God. Today’s lesson from Deuteronomy is part of Moses’ “last sermon” before he would die and the people would move forward to fight for the promised land.

So what did Moses say? Basically, he said, “Look folks, you have a choice, a choice that you will have to make every day. You must choose – every day – between life and death. Death is not listening to or obeying/loving God. Life is listening to God, remembering what God has told you to do, and loving God by following God’s ways. Your choice. I tell you: Choose LIFE.”

Centuries later, in Jesus’ day, the people faced the same choice; and guess what: So do WE. God gave us a choice, life or death! And unfortunately (or really not), God gave us the freedom to decide for ourselves what to do with our freedom.

In the Gospel lesson read today, Jesus challenged the people about how they were making their decisions. It was right after King Herod Antipas had Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, beheaded because John had criticized Herod for stealing his brother’s wife. Jesus expressed his frustration with the people: “Hey, John came out of the wilderness and would not drink or eat much, and you called him demon-possessed, and I came eating and drinking, and you declared me a drunkard and criticized me for associating with the wrong kind of people. There’s no pleasing you!!” Then, in the part we didn’t read, Jesus criticized the towns where he had performed so many miracles for choosing not to see what God was doing. He ended up saying that foreign cities, even despised Sodom, did better than they.

After those harsh words and a prayer thanking God for hiding the truth from those confident in their own wisdom and instead revealing the truth to the lowly and simple, Jesus offered all the

people another opportunity to make a good choice:

“Come unto me, you who struggle under burdens, and I will give you rest. My yoke will fit you well and help you in your life.” (Matthew 11:28-29, paraphrased)

So here we are, sitting in church on Independence Day weekend, and we are being told that we need to exercise our freedom of choice: Choose life! Say YES to Jesus’s yoke, to receiving his help to deal with all the stuff that threatens to snuff the life out of you, and also to say YES to doing what Jesus told us God wants us to do: “Love God in every way you can; and related to that, love your neighbor (and don’t draw that line between who is and is not neighbor too tightly!) as much as you love yourself.” When we make a decision to be yoked in Jesus Christ, to let him guide us and nudge us and whisper his guidance into our hearts, we choose life.

Little children are taught early on that their hands and words have a big choice: to help or to hurt others. That freedom of choice remains with us throughout our lives. For Christians, the choice is: Will I follow the way of Jesus Christ, and share love and forgiveness and hope, or not? Daily, this is a life/death choice.

Preacher/writer Thomas Long shared a story to challenge folks in the call to follow the way of Jesus: “My senior year in high school I had a small part in the senior play. Truthfully, it wasn’t actually a part in the play — I was far too shy for that — it was a part off-stage. I was the sound-effects person. When the script called for knocking at the door, I rapped two sticks together. When the phone was supposed to ring, I touched the wires together on the battery-operated bell, watching carefully so that I would stop just as the actor picked up the receiver.

“We worked hard on that play. The director was a young woman who taught English at school, a new addition to the faculty, and she poured herself into us and into the play. In the afternoons when school was out, she carefully coached all the actors on their lines and helped them get their timing right. She would then dash to get some fast food, returning to the school in the evenings for rehearsals. Afterwards, she would often stay late at night, working with us on the props and pitching in on the painting of the sets. Unselfishly, she gave herself to this moment in our lives.

“Night after night we rehearsed, and on opening night, we were ready; we had the play down perfectly. The curtains opened; the house was packed with our families and friends; electricity was in the air.

“The first act was a dream. The play was a comedy, and every funny line evoked rich laughter from the audience. They were enjoying themselves, as we were too. But in the second act, one of the actors forgot his lines. You could see on his face that he knew it was his turn to speak, but he could not find the words. The audience did not sense it yet, but the other actors and those of us offstage did.

“What to do? Everybody was paralyzed as this unfortunate classmate squirmed and tried to remember what he was supposed to say. I was standing in the wings, next to the young teacher

who was the director. She was leaning toward the stage, every ounce of energy aimed encouragingly toward the struggling kid on the stage.

“The script in her hand, she was just about to whisper his line out to him, when suddenly he spoke. It was not the line in the script — in his anxiety, he just made something up — but he spoke. Not only that, what he said happened to be funny, and the audience roared with laughter.

“Everybody on stage relaxed; they had gotten past a bad spot and could now move on. Unfortunately, though, the forgetful actor heard the laughter of the audience and liked it, so he made up another line. This, too, was funny...not as funny as the first line, but the audience chuckled. So, the actor made up another line, and another, and still another.

“The other actors were trying to respond to him, but they couldn’t. He was out of control now, spinning off whatever came into his head. The play was disintegrating, lost. The audience had now figured it out, and what little laughter was left was nervous and mocking.

“I don’t remember how we got out of it, how we finished the play, or even if we did. The memory that sticks in my mind is looking up to see the director, the young woman who had given night after night of her time to work with us and make us ready, this woman who had poured herself into this play for our benefit, standing in the wings, watching and crying....

“We, too, have been given our parts to play in the drama of God’s redemption. We’ve heard our gospel marching orders: “Go out. Seek first the kingdom of God; pray without ceasing; repay no one evil for evil; feed my lambs; bear one another’s burdens; be kind to one another; forgive one another; love your enemies; be merciful, even as your Father is merciful..” But even now the tempter whispers in our ears: change the script, make up your own lines... (*Whispering the Lyrics*, Thomas G. Long, edited by FTE)

The whispering may come to us: You can’t trust God, you have to provide for your own life. Or, You make your own life, so just watch out for yourself and don’t let this religion-stuff make things complicated. Get ahead, be tough, make your own way. (pause)

So this weekend and every weekend, we have been given freedom! A choice to make: God’s way, or our own ways. Stumbling over the burdens of our own selfishness and anger and guilt, or letting our Lord yoke us into grace-filled, love-sharing living. Every day, we either ask God to help us see the way, or we don’t. It’s our choice. Our freedom. May we choose LIFE. Amen.