

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 16, 2020

(Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

On November 7, 2014, the then 31-year-old pastor Zach Zehnder of the Cross Church in Mount Dora, Florida stepped into the pulpit and began to preach to his congregation. Fifty-three hours and 18 minutes, 200 pages of notes and 600 PowerPoint slides later, he concluded his sermon.¹ To answer the question I'm sure some of you may be wondering about, yes, it was **one continuous sermon** that ran the entire course of scripture from Genesis to Revelation, and it was certified by the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest speech ever given.

Sixty-six books of the Bible. Psalms. Proverbs. Stories of the patriarchs. The law and the prophets. The life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The birth of the early church. **Every bit of it** was included in Pastor Zehnder's record-breaking unpacking of the Old and New Testaments.

So my question to you this morning is, "Are you ready?" Are you ready to watch me break a record? Well, it's not happening today, so don't worry.

What this illustration does, though, is set in context this morning's passage from the Book of Deuteronomy. The lectionary gives us six verses from the final part of what we know as The Torah – the Five Books of Moses – that are the parts of scripture traditionally attributed to him as their author. In Deuteronomy what we find is his lengthy final address – a very long sermon – delivered not long before his death.

By comparison, consider first that the Gettysburg Address of Abraham Lincoln in 1863 is 272 words in length. George Washington's farewell address in 1796 comes in at just over 6,000 words. In what is actually a series of speeches shared by the patriarch with those about to enter the Promised Land, this final discourse is 28,352 words in length spread out over more than 30 chapters. I was curious about how long Moses would have needed to share all of this, so I did a bit of math (admittedly always a dangerous thing for me to try and certainly not one of my strong suits). The average person speaks at the low end at a rate of about 125 words per minute, or approximately 7,500 words per hour.² Using that as the baseline, Moses would have taken about four hours to say everything he needed to say ... far short of Pastor Zehnder's 53 hours, but still an impressive amount of time.

¹ "This Guy Preached the World's Longest Sermon: The Whole Bible in 53 Hours." The Gospel Coalition blogs, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/this-guy-preached-the-worlds-longest-sermon-the-whole-bible-in-53-hours/>.

² "How Many Words are in a One Hour Speech?" Number of Words website, <https://numberofwords.com/faq/how-many-words-are-in-a-60-minute-speech/>.

It's an interesting side note to today's reading that one chapter later in Deuteronomy we see where the Israelites were instructed to gather every seven years for a complete reading of this book. Robert Alter notes that this practice was later replaced by a regular annual reading of the Torah in its entirety, sectioned up and spread out over the course of the year.³ In this moment, though, what is clear is that this wasn't intended to be a one-time instance of summative and instructive rhetoric. It was something to which the people should return again and again through succeeding generations ... a continuing reflection on the law first given by God at Mount Sinai and now reiterated and interpreted by Moses at the border of the Promised Land.

The 120-year life of Moses is drawing to a close. From being given up as a baby to being raised as a prince ... from being cast out as a murderer to returning as a liberator ... from leading the people into a wilderness to bringing them into sight of a new home: much had happened. Soon, he "ascends Mount Nebo, solitary as he has always been; more solitary than he has been before."⁴ He will be given a glimpse into the land, allowed by God to see "Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain — that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees — as far as Zoar."⁵ Then, "at the Lord's command,"⁶ Moses will die, having at the last received God's assurance that the promise of the land for his descendants remains. In the instant of a final word from God, Moses draws his final breath.

Before any of that happens, though, he speaks to the people. What is he **saying to them** – and **to us** – in the passage we heard a short time ago? Or more accurately, what are they – and we – **hearing**? On the surface, in these final verses of his instruction for the people, he relates what seems to be strictly an **either/or** or **if/then** proposition from God. Paring it down to the core we reach this: choose life and prosperity and be blessed; choose death and adversity and be cursed.

But speaking is only half of this; **listening** ... and **hearing** ... and **absorbing** is the other half. The idea of hearing God is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. God spoke to many in the early history of Israel; hearing God resulted in families changing their homes ... and their lives ... and ultimately, the world. It's even at the root of what I consider one of the most beautiful passages in the Old Testament: the Shema.

Sh'ma Yisra'eil, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."⁷ Hearing what Moses was saying – and through him, hearing what God had spoken before – was crucial. But there is more that follows; there is more that comes after the Shema in the early chapters of Deuteronomy. "You shall love

³ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses*, fn. 10, p. 724.

⁴ Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, p. 201. Quoted in Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament*, p. 194.

⁵ Deuteronomy 34:1-3 (NRSV).

⁶ Deuteronomy 34:5 (NRSV).

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4 (NRSV).

the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.”⁸

Listen to God. Love God. Hold on to what God is saying. And do all of these things with your heart. Be guided by your heart. Ponder them in your heart. Decide with your heart.

It is the **deciding** – the **choosing** – that we return to in today’s passage. Do we listen to God and choose blessing? Or do we turn away from God and choose curse? It seems very cut and dried: if we pick the good, we get the good; if we pick the bad, we get the bad. In reading through a few commentaries on this passage, I was struck by the clear use of very particular words ... words like **obedience** and **covenant** and **resistance**. I reflected on the myriad choices that we make every day ... choices that may have little long-term impact and those that could have significant results (for bad or good). Do I wear this shirt or that one? Do I have this or that for lunch? Do I go to this place or stay home? Do I take this route to my appointment or find another way? Do I go to church or do I do something else? Do I visit this friend or wait? Do I make this phone call or hold off?

I also reflected on the choices made by those who struggle significantly in life ... struggles that are often deep or painful and for which the choices potentially hold even greater consequences. Do I pay this power bill or buy that medication? Do I take this child to the doctor or pray they get better because the money’s not there? Do I stay in this abusive relationship or do I get out and seek help? Do I listen to the pleas of my friends and family and enter rehab or do I choose to take just one more hit or one more drink? Do I step in to help this person being bullied or do I wait and hope that it stops?

There are choices confronting us **constantly**. Let me be clear: I am not in any way trying to equate choosing a lunch spot, or a route home, or whether to pay for a utility or medicine, or whether to stay in a harmful relationship as decisions equal to choices for blessings or curses. With everything I’ve outlined, I’m simply pointing out that the issue of choice and the choices we make are always with us – and they have consequences. Likewise, Moses was pointing out to the Israelites that they would always be faced with choices – and they too would have consequences.

One thing is the thread running through all of them – the thread of God’s presence. This outfit or that; this meal or that; power bill or medication; abusive relationship or freedom; addiction or recovery: with whatever confronts us, God is always there. God isn’t distant or disinterested; God isn’t remote or removed. **God is there**. I believe that because God loves us, God wants us to make good choices. When we do, God rejoices; when we don’t, God weeps.

But one thing God never does is give up on us, for choices to change course will always be there. As Moses reminds the Israelites, “The choice of life always remains an option.”⁹ No

⁸ Deuteronomy 6:5-6 (NRSV).

⁹ W. Sibley Towner, “Deuteronomy 30:15-20 – Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1*, p. 343.

matter what we may do ... no matter what we may choose this hour or this day ... God is still there with hands extended, with a heart that's open, and with a love that's eternal. Admittedly that's sometimes hard to remember and even harder to fathom. Sometimes we make choices we regret and wonder why we did ... and may even wonder if God will forgive us.

In a word, yes. Knowing we will often be worse, God still urges us to do better. Knowing we will often choose poorly, God still urges us to choose well. Knowing we will often choose anger, God still urges us to choose peace. Knowing sometimes we may even be tempted to choose hate, God still urges us to choose love.

Hear, O Israel ... hear, O Millwood: the Lord is our God. God loves you; likewise, make the choice to love ... God, and one another, and yourselves. Love the Lord your God. Obey the Lord your God. Hold fast to the Lord your God.

Choose the Lord your God.

Amen.