

The Fork in the Road

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Introduction

I share today's sermon title with **2009 movie starring Josh Cooke and Jamie King**. In this movie, Cooke plays an escaped convict named Will who unfortunately decides to hide in a barn on the same night the owners of the property get into a major fight. A gunshot goes off in the house, and moments later, the wife (April) drags her husband's dead body outside and into the barn. She, of course, discovers Will and knows he has witnessed the murder.

That is the moment where the movie gets its title. These two people have come to a "fork in the road" in their lives. A critical decision – a life changing decision – must be made. Their decision is to work together to conceal the murder. To choose otherwise would mean prison for both.

We are days away from the beginning of Lent. Our theme this year will be "The Journey." This theme is inspired by Luke 9:51:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

At that moment Jesus came to a fork in the road in His earthly journey. He chose to journey to Jerusalem – a journey that would eventually take Him to the cross and to the empty tomb on Easter. Our Lenten services will be a guided tour that will also bring us to the cross and empty tomb. Next week you will pick up your passports and trip-tiks for your journey.

Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem. But not everyone around Him made the same choice. As a result of His decision, and His difficult teachings about what was to come, a large number of those people who had been following Him opted for a different path, the other fork in the road. We read in John 6:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. (John 6:66)

These former disciples opted for a journey that took them in a different direction, a journey without the cross and without the empty tomb.

Several thousand years before the fork in the road that faced Jesus and those earliest disciples, the people of Israel were also challenged with a choice. Their leader, Moses, was also about to depart from them. He stood before them at this particular moment and let them know he had led them to a fork in the road.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. (Deuteronomy 30:15)

There it is. The fork in the road. Like every fork in the road, we are offered two options.

OPTION #1: LIFE AND PROSPERITY

If you take that option, Moses says, here is what the journey will look like.

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. (Deuteronomy 30:16)

Those who journey along this side of the fork will be expected to live in a way that is consistent with the commandments of God. If those commands, laws and decrees don't match with the way you want to live, then this is the wrong option for you. If, however, they do, you will experience the blessings of God.

OPTION #2: DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

But that isn't the only option. Moses offers a second one:

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deuteronomy 30:17-18)

Those who journey on this side of the fork can do whatever they please and wrap their lives around whatever they think is important. This is by far the most popular choice. But the consequence is that those who travel that way will never know the blessing of God.

It is as if Moses is standing right there where the road forks. He tells the people he has led for 40 years that the choices are clear:

- One way leads to life and prosperity
- The other way leads to death and destruction

I look at those two options and wonder "What kind of idiot would choose death and destruction?" And then I realize... ME. I am that kind of idiot. Don't get too smug, because you are too. Presented with the possibility of life and prosperity, we all choose death and destruction.

In the 3rd chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul lays it out clearly and painfully:

"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed

blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-12)

Go back and re-read the other lectionary texts for today. You will see descriptions of people who have chosen a journey that destroys rather than the only one that gives life.

Why then, do we take that fork in the road? If life and prosperity is an option – and clearly the better option – why journey along the road of death and destruction?

Ultimately, of course, the answer to that question is “sin.” But Moses gives us two insights as to how that sin begins to lead us down the wrong path.

INSIGHT #1: THE ATTITUDE OF OUR HEARTS

If your heart turns away ... (Deuteronomy 30:17)

“Attitude” is a word familiar to a pilot. On the dashboard of the airplane there is an attitude indicator, which lets the pilot know the relationship of the plane to the horizon. It provides a measure of orientation. It is important to know where the nose and wings of the plane are pointed.

For Moses it was important to know where the heart was pointed, so he warned the children of Israel about the attitude of their hearts. For the moment their hearts began to lose its critical orientation, they would begin to veer off course and find themselves on the road to death and destruction. You will go in the direction your heart is pointing!

Multiple times in the book of Deuteronomy Moses would remind the people:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:2, 13:3)

Hearts stay properly oriented only as they remain in relationship with the object of their love. Our love for God must be nurtured in our deep and abiding relationship with Him. Those hearts must know what it means to be forgiven of their sins and they stay properly oriented through our daily devotions, our private and corporate worship, and the way we live and proclaim our faith.

INSIGHT #2: THE ATTRITION OF OUR VALUES

Moses frames it like this:

if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them (Deuteronomy 30:17)

The children of Israel had seen their God do amazing things.

- He destroyed the firstborn in every house of Egypt
- He parted the waters of the Red Sea and swept away the mighty army of Pharaoh, while providing them a way to freedom
- He provided food and water for them in the desert
- He guided their journey with pillars of cloud and fire

They had every reason to say “My God is better than any other god.”

But when you live around people who don't know your God, it is easy and natural to gradually become like them. And then, over time, if we are not careful, we run the risk of adopting their values and their worldview. And, Moses reminds us, doing so leads down an undesirable path. Watch out!

APPLICATION

Karen and I did a bit of traveling in the last week. I love the GPS feature on our phones. It is so refreshing to hear that gentle voice coax me to “stay right at the fork.” I will confess I gain a bit of sadistic pleasure by disobeying her from time to time. But she never loses patience with me. “Make a U-turn at the next intersection,” she encourages me. And when I do, when I follow her directions, I know that I will ultimately hear her say “You have arrived.” I love that. Sometimes I use the GPS when I go home from church, just to hear her say, “You have arrived.”

Spiritually, we know the path we want to travel. We want “life and prosperity.” But it's impossible to walk that journey on our own. We need a GPS with a gentle voice.

No, we need a Savior. We need what the season of Lent offers us.

In verses not included with today's Old Testament reading, Moses tells his people:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

The word is very near you. So near that He lives within us if we allow Him to.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:14)

And when He does, as we face those critical moments in our lives, His voice will sound out “stay right at the fork.”

Whether we obey is our choice. Life and prosperity. Death and destruction.

I conclude with the words of Moses:

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life... (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

Amen.