

Choosing Life

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Bible Reading

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground. But the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened. *(Luke 24:1-12)*

Reading from Swedenborg

Nothing flows into us from the Lord but what is good, and nothing from hell but what is evil. So the Lord is constantly leading us out of evil and toward good, while hell is constantly leading us into evil. Unless we were in between, we would have neither thought nor intention, much less any freedom of choice. We have all these gifts because of the balance of good and evil. So if the Lord were to turn away, and we were left to our own evil, we would no longer be human. *(Heaven and Hell #546)*

Sermon

I call heaven and earth to record against you this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life, so that both you and your descendants may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

In the early church, Easter was the principal festival—Christmas came along later. There is a reason for this. What had launched the disciples on their missions was not Jesus' birth but his resurrection. What had formed their own faith was not stories about Mary and Joseph, about the shepherds and the wise men, but their own experience with their master. The crucifixion had shaken that faith to the core. The

resurrection had lifted it to a whole new level. It transformed the disciples from a stunned and bewildered band into passionate bearers of the gospel—the good news.

The good news was not simply that Christ was risen. That had been good news to the disciples, but it would mean little to people who had never known Jesus before the crucifixion. The good news that affected them directly was the news of the forgiveness of sins; of the kingdom of heaven.

The good news was not that death had been overcome. As someone has observed, the death rate remained constant at one hundred percent. The good news was that death need not be feared. It was deliverance from preoccupation with death, freedom to focus on living in a new way. This would be the experience of the convert, equivalent to the disciples' experience of the resurrection. This would be the living presence of the Lord in the convert's life. This is what the convert would celebrate at Easter.

It is intriguing to see a parallel to this in our own times. There are more and more people who have had what we call "near death experiences"; people who have, by most definitions, actually died, and have returned to life. By the testimony of the vast majority of them, they do not tend to think a great deal about their immortality. They no longer fear death, but they have no particular longing for it, either. The biggest change is in their view of life here and now. Having encountered a being who understands them through and through and loves them effortlessly and without reserve, they now see their own lives in terms of their love and understanding. They have met in person what our theology tries to tell us about: the marriage of the good and the true, of love and wisdom. And that has become, in gospel terms, the pearl of great price.

This is another way of expressing the gospel that the apostles carried. It is the core of the Lord's teaching. He was constantly trying to stir his disciples' minds into action, and their hearts into compassion. It was not enough simply to tell them to love each other. There are too many different ideas about what love is. He needed to tell them to love each other as he had loved them.

By his behavior, by the way he treated them and everyone he encountered, he defined love. There was nothing particularly sentimental about it; nothing spineless or self-effacing. This love had courage and clarity, firmness of purpose, and extraordinary sensitivity. This love was capable of the ultimate self-sacrifice, but without any trace of martyr complex. This love listened to others with full attentiveness, and responded in unexpected ways. It could work miracles, it could tell stones, it could weep. It was so human that it gave new depth and definition to the very word "human," saying to each of us, "This is what you are intended to be. Love each other as I have loved you."

What we are talking about is the spiritual sense of the Easter story. Very simply put, love is spiritual life, and lack of love is spiritual death. The Lord was able to rise from the grave physically because he had so completely overcome death spiritually. By becoming love itself, he had become life itself.

It would seem obvious that he did not come to deliver us from physical death. There have been profoundly devoted Christian souls, who gave of themselves with a completeness and generosity that puts the rest of us to shame. They have died just as surely as everyone else. The difference is that while they were alive, they were wonderfully alive. We need have no doubt as to their ongoing life in the spiritual world, any more than we need doubt our own. But that is not the point. We are not talking about time and eternity; we are talking about quality, here and now.

Some years ago, an elderly member of one of our churches was prevailed upon by her doctor to move from the house she had lived in all her married life into a nursing home. From a medical point of view, this was the only thing to do. She was nearing ninety, had been widowed for a number of years, lived alone, and was having more and more trouble taking care of herself.

She died within months of the move, essentially from depression. What made sense from a medical point of view was spiritual nonsense. From a spiritual point of view, the purpose of the move was not to prolong her life, it was to prolong her days. In effect, she was asked to exchange a short span of time in the surroundings she loved for a longer span of time in surroundings that were without meaning for her. It is certainly arguable that six months of contentment is better than any number of years of depression.

As soon as we take seriously the teaching that life is essentially love, we move out of the numbers game—counting how many years we can eke out—and become engaged with questions of quality. We can have some effect on the numbers; we can take care of ourselves or not, for example. But we have no choice whatever as to the ultimate outcome. To the materialist, the commandment to “choose life” makes no sense at all.

We have a great deal to say, though, about life in its spiritual sense. Whatever our circumstances may be, we have choices as to how we will respond. Basically, we can try to make things better, or we can try to advance our own interests. These two agendas are often, though not always, in conflict with each other; and the ever-present question is which we will put first. It is a question we face in favorable and unfavorable circumstances alike.

For people in truly oppressive circumstances, this may seem a harsh doctrine—and it should not be lightly or callously asserted. We must not minimize the difficulties that face people from abusive homes or people in abject poverty, for example.

But Victor Frankl’s testimony carries immense conviction. He was a Jew who survived a Nazi concentration camp. There can hardly be more cruel and dehumanizing situations than this; there could hardly be less freedom; yet his observation was that his fellow prisoners were still making fundamental choices. Some were wallowing in self-pity or hatred, some were conniving for their own survival, while some were trying to be as helpful as they could to other sufferers. They knew that they could face the gas chamber any day. Yet it was still possible to “choose life”—and some did. Perhaps all a person could do might be to murmur a word or offer a glance of concern; but to choose to do that apparently little thing carried profound meaning.

On a much less dramatic scale, it is significant that recent decades have seen a burgeoning of “support groups.” These are groups of people facing similar difficulties. They work because people can gain through their trials a kind of understanding that comes in no other way. Yet it is obvious that not all people do gain from their trials. Some become bitter and alienated. Clearly, the circumstances alone have not made people wise, nor have they made them bitter. The pivotal difference has been in the response to the circumstances—in the choice of life or death.

In a way that Deuteronomy does not obviously intend, this choice between life and death is literally a choice between blessing and cursing. Do we choose to use our lives to bless others, or to curse them? What are we looking for as we start each day? What are we looking for as we meet the people we live and work with?

There is bound to be some self-concern. Times when we do not care about being thought well of are few and far between. But again, the formative choices come when that desire impels us to shade the truth in our favor. Then there are times when our patience wears thin, or when the well of our sympathy seems to run dry; when we want to indulge ourselves in the pleasures of self-righteousness, or simply distance ourselves from someone in need. How do we choose to respond? And even more importantly, how honest are we with ourselves? There are clear indications in our theology that we do ourselves more damage by our rationalizations of our sins than by the sins themselves.

If we look closely, we will discover that we rationalize our sins, that we make excuses for ourselves, because we are afraid of condemnation. In a strange and ultimately self-defeating way, we try to avoid the curse by convincing ourselves that it is a blessing. As one writer put it, we say “evil, be thou my good.” It is a line that could have come from Swedenborg’s pen. He expressed the same thought by saying that whatever we love, we call good.

If the primary reason for our rationalizations is fear of condemnation, the gospel strikes at the root of the problem. The gospel is the good news of forgiveness; the news that whatever we may think of ourselves, the Lord loves us in the very practical sense of wanting to bless us. This is the same Lord who knows us far better than we know ourselves—far better than we can ever know ourselves. Not only is there no point to rationalizing, there is no reason to rationalize. Ultimately, we are not deceiving anyone but ourselves.

In the incarnation, the Lord met life as we do. He saw things as we see them, felt them as we feel them. This is central to our view of life, of scripture, and of the Divine. In the kinds of circumstances we meet, and in fact under trials greater than we can imagine, he chose life. The crucifixion is the great symbol of everything a heartless world can inflict on us; and the resurrection is the great symbol of the Lord’s choice of life.

He came to preserve our ability to make that same choice. In the Sermon on the Mount, he told us that he had not come to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. He fulfilled them by filling them with new meaning, by taking anyone who would follow to a new depth of understanding. The outward forms of the law and the prophets—the words themselves—remained constant. They now became vehicles of what our theology calls a spiritual sense; of spiritual meaning.

Imagine for a moment that it is the risen Christ who speaks the words from Deuteronomy that are our text: “I call heaven and earth to record against you this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life...” Now they refer not so much to the behavioral laws of Sinai as to the law of love. The Lord’s whole life was the word made flesh, the law and the prophets lived out on their deepest level. That life provided us with a definition of life, and by contrast with a definition of death. It provided us with a matchless image of blessing, and by contrast with a chilling definition of cursing. Now, especially at Easter, he calls us to choose life. Amen.

Prayer

Thank you, O Lord our Savior, Jesus Christ, for choosing life when all the forces of death in the universe were arrayed against you. When all the evil of hell was bent on destroying you—on destroying your love and wisdom; on destroying your life-giving power—you defeated them by choosing spiritual life over

death, eternal blessing over cursing. As we celebrate your resurrection, the ultimate expression of your choice for life, may we also be inspired to choose life. Inspire us to choose life and blessing by living with love, understanding, and kindness toward all. Amen.

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