

## SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 12, 2023

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20 | PSALM 119:1-8 | 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9 | MATTHEW 5:21-37

There's a line in Elizabeth Strout's novel *Olive Kitteredge* where she talks about how life is made up of big bursts and little bursts.<sup>1</sup> Big bursts are things like marriages and children. Little bursts are things like the waitress who knows your regular order. The big bursts give life meaning, but they're also dangerously unpredictable, which is why we need the little bursts to make life more humane.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy is about an unmistakably big burst in the life of God's people. In fact, it's such a big burst that there is an entire book of the Torah devoted to it. It comes right as the Israelites are ending their journey through the wilderness and are about to enter the promised land. Moses won't be allowed to go into the promised land with them, so as the people enter this new stage of their life together, he gives this long speech. The speech informs the people of their history, reminds them of God's faithfulness to them, and offers a vision of how God will shape their community in the future.

And at the end of the speech, Moses acknowledges that this big burst is not without risk. And so he lays out the terms clearly. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

In our American context, we may hear the admonition to "choose life" and start thinking about issues like end-of-life care or reproductive choice. In most of our political arguments, we tend to approach these issues in the narrowest possible terms.<sup>2</sup> And as a result, many of our debates seem to have very little to do with how people are actually born, the ways in which people die, and what happens in between.

The Hebrew Bible has a much richer understanding of constitutes life. Life means *shalom* or "peace." In one essay, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gives a great definition which I've probably read to you before, but I'll do it again. He says that *shalom* is "completeness, perfection, the harmonious working of a complex system, integrated diversity, a state in which everything is in its proper place, and all is at one with the physical and ethical laws governing the universe."<sup>3</sup>

That definition puts a few things from today's reading in focus for us. For one, this life, this peace is part of God's character. If you read Sacks's definition of *shalom*, you could be forgiven for thinking he's talking about God. God is completeness. God is perfection. God is one. On Trinity Sunday, we might even say that God is the harmonious working of a complex system. So whenever we talk about life, we're not simply talking about something that can be reduced to biology. We're making a theological claim about the nature of God.

The second thing that comes into focus is how that divine life is given to us. In this reading from Deuteronomy, life is presented first and foremost as a gift of God. It isn't something we can conjure up out of our own will or desire. It is something that God sets before us. Just as the people of God are given this land to inhabit, they are given the gift of life free from the cruel whims of pharaoh and free from the barren scarcity of the wilderness. And now, at the edge of the promised land, they are given an invitation to create a society, a community, a culture that echoes God's *shalom*.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteredge* (Random House Publishing Group, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> For what it's worth, the ELCA has a social statement on abortion and a social message on end-of-life care that are worth reading.

<sup>3</sup> "Covenant & Conversation | Naso | The Pursuit of Peace | Rabbi Sacks," May 26, 2017, <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/naso/the-pursuit-of-peace/>.

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Put those two ideas together, and you get a vivid picture. One in which life is not simply the absence of death. And one in which peace isn't merely the absence of war. Life, peace, and shalom mean God's creation is perfectly reflecting the character and love of its maker.

This is all good, but it's also very abstract. And if you're looking for ways to choose life, reframing it as "choosing the harmonious working of complex systems" might not help you much. But in his speech, Moses actually gives us a bunch of very specific examples of how we can choose life, of how we can receive and reflect God's *shalom*. I'm not going to read the whole book, but here are some highlights. We choose life by sharing feasts with the hungry, canceling unpayable debts, restricting the wealth of political leaders, offering sanctuary to fugitive slaves, not charging interests on loans to fellow citizens, leaving unharvested food for the poor, and paying workers their wages promptly.

What do you notice about all of those? Most obviously, they're all about our relationship with other people. But to get really specific, they're about creating a world where no one gets stuck or trapped in their circumstances. A society that promotes life is a society where people don't spend their entire lives paying off debts. A world that promotes peace is a world where people don't get trapped in exploitative or abusive relationships. A community that practices shalom is a community where people don't get stuck in generational poverty or hunger, where people don't spend their lives just trying to make it through the day.

So the big burst of the story isn't just entering this new land. It's the invitation to create a society that is open to flourishing, reconciliation, and wholeness. And that's the same invitation that God gives to each of us.

Do the people of God get it right? No. They don't. If you were here last week, you heard Isaiah's indictment of what the society becomes. They get into the promised land and become like everyone else. They argue and fight. They seek security in wealth and violence. When they go to worship, they sulk around and mumble through it. But God keeps sending them prophets, keeps reminding the people to seek the life and peace of God.

Do we always get it right? No. We don't. We blame systemic sins on individuals. We ignore generational issues when they're no longer interesting to us. We prioritize our own interests over all else. That's why we begin worship with confession and forgiveness every week.

And yet, God never stops choosing to give us the gift of life, never stops offering us the opportunity to reflect God's *shalom* in the world. No matter how many times we forget our calling, God keeps on God gives us neighbors to love, God keeps on giving us work to do together, and God keeps on accompanying us on the journey.

At every moment of our lives, not just in the big bursts but the little ones too, God is offering us that same gift of life. It's a world transformed and renewed through the resurrection of Jesus. A world in which no one is stuck or trapped in their circumstances but can live to the praise of God's name.

A world filled with the glory of the divine: God's perfect shalom, God's complete peace, and God's inexhaustible life, this day and always.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor