



October 31, 2004

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
We the People
M. Craig Barnes

In two days we will make important choices about the leadership of the nation. But to make that choice, we must first decide what kind of people we want to be. Leaders cannot decide that for us. We have to choose. And according to Moses, this is a choice between life and death as a people.

Moses had taken the Hebrew people as far as he could. They now stood on the threshold of the Promised Land. It had been forty years since they left slavery and journeyed through the wilderness learning to trust God. Moses is now giving his last sermon.

In the first part of this sermon, he reminds them what they have learned about God's faithfulness. He also reminds them of the wonderful future that lies ahead just across the Jordan River in the Promised Land. Then he tells the people that they have to make a great choice. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, holding fast to him."

Moses' long life is almost over and by this time has seen a lot. He knew that the survival of this people was completely dependent on the choices they made because he had long known that God honors human choices. Thirty-eight years earlier, Moses had stood at the gate of the Promised Land. But then the people voted not to enter the land because they were afraid of the giants in the land. So God let them wander in the desert until they died.

Moses is now preaching to their children. He tells this next generation that they face the same choice their parents did. And Moses cautions them to choose carefully. "Don't choose to be afraid. Choose life by holding fast to God. It is the only way to inherit his great dream.

From the moment God first gave this dream to Abraham, and told him that his descendants would be blessed with a Promised Land, God was clear that this blessing had a mission to it. That mission was to be a blessing to all of the families of the earth. So the blessing was never meant to be reduced to its individual benefits. Every time we think about what is in the land for us, we quickly become afraid of the giants that will take something away from us. The only way to overcome that fear is to remain clear about the mission to live as a blessing to others. Together, we as a people can overcome all of the giant problems in our land. But that is true only if we remember that our blessing is to become a blessing to others.

This is what it actually means to be a nation under God. It means that we cherish a particular vision of life together. It means that this vision has come from God's own clear teaching about justice and generosity, humility and service, gratitude and even sacrifice. To be a nation under God

means that we teach this vision to our children so they grow up to pursue holy purposes. It means that the nation does not exist for you, but you exist for the work of God in the nation.

As the prophets later explained to the Hebrews, the only way they could keep their freedom was to work for God's vision of life together. And the day they stopped doing justice, the prophets warned, would be the day they would lose their freedom. That was exactly what the Babylonian Captivity was all about. So their life as a nation was directly dependent on holding fast to God's vision of our life together. Without the dream, the vision, the people perish. Israel's best leaders always knew that.

The pressing question for this election in a nation that keeps pledging to be a nation under God is can we elect a leader who talks in terms of justice and generosity, humility and service, gratitude and even sacrifice. Or have we become so self absorbed that we force both of our viable candidates to argue over who will do best at taking care of you. "I will protect you." "I will give you jobs, tax cuts, cheaper prescription drugs." It is not that these things are unimportant. We all care about them. But they are not exactly the same thing as an inspiring dream to find something that looks like the kingdom of God on earth. Getting a tax cut is not really the kind of thing that shapes the soul of the nation.

I am not really criticizing the candidates. We only get the candidates for office that we create. Could even Kennedy get elected today with such statements as "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.?" I wonder. I wonder if we are now choosing to ask what the country can do for us.

As Moses and the prophets would warn us, that is the best way to lose our freedom. The person who is most enslaved is the one who serves the illusion that happiness comes from just taking care of oneself.

When I was child, one of my favorite television programs was the Twilight Zone. I still remember the episode about a man who died and went to a splendid place where his every wish was immediately granted. At first he was delighted to discover that he had somehow made it to heaven in spite of living such a selfish life. He had only to ask for money, beautiful women, mansions, a Rolls Royce, and all the wishes came true. But after a few days of this he grew bored. And with boredom came misery, and eventually he began to go crazy. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore and screamed to the angel, "If this is heaven, I want to go to the other place!" But the angel laughed and replied, "This is the other place."

Tragically, that is what is happening to our society. We are in danger of turning it into the other place. Afraid of living with giant needs and wants, we are creating a hellish culture where we waste our lives trying to grab something more.

In a wonderful book titled *Democracy's Discontent*, Harvard professor Michael Sandel has traced a fundamental shift that has occurred in our understanding of freedom since the second World War. It used to be that freedom meant we were free to work together for the common good. We were free from tyranny. We were free to control the forces that govern our life together. But in recent years we have grown too afraid of the world to still work for the common good.

It feels like it is no longer possible to govern the forces that control us. Our families break apart, sometimes after enormous effort. The company can downsize and throw you on the street. At a stop light, someone can rip you out of your car and drive away with it. Terrorists can sneak into our midst, and no matter how many soldiers we send into how many countries, we cannot seem to get rid of them. So the vulnerability isn't going away.

It feels like the world is broken and it can't be fixed. Despairing that it is possible to fix things for society, we settle for trying to fix things in our own lives. So now freedom has come to mean, not that we are free to serve, but we are free to do what we want with our own lives. The danger of this is that a collection of individuals grabbing what they want does not make a free society. What it makes is Hell.

It is fear that makes us give up on the grand dreams that molded this nation, and become obsessed with our own piece of the American pie. It is also fear that tempts our leaders to say, "I am just here to give you what you want." It used to be that we were accustomed to hearing our leaders call mostly for sacrifice from us.

In his first speech as the British Prime Minister in 1940, Winston Churchill tried to prepare the nation for a long battle against Nazi aggression. He said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. . . . But I take up my task in buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men." And his nation followed him into a sacrifice of blood, toil, tears, and sweat.

Today, by contrast, we expect our leaders to tell us that they will make us prosperous. And we expect prosperity without sacrifice. But offering sacrifice has always been a part of God's dream for our life together.

"Well fine, pastor, but what do I do about voting this Tuesday. Churchill isn't running for office. And we have killed all of the dreamers like Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. I just have two viable choices." Of course, you are not expecting me to tell you how to vote. But I can tell you this. On this Reformation Sunday it is good for us to remember that the Protestant Reformers claimed that the Kingdom of God can never be limited by the political options of the kingdoms of earth. God has his own ways, and we pray that by grace he will continue to bless this country that we may be a blessing to all of the families of the earth. But we also do the best we can in every election, with the options we have. Your call is to cherish God's vision of a Kingdom, and to vote for the candidate you think comes closest to advocating for it. The fact that we may disagree with each other about which candidate is best for this holy calling does not matter. What matters is that we agree to base our vote on something other than "What's in it for me?".

It is actually after Tuesday that you make the most important choices. In a hundred different ways every day you are electing either to hold fast to God's dream for our life together or in fear to live for yourself. Our future depends on those choices. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Chose life that you and your descendants may live: loving God, obeying him, holding fast to him." Amen.