Deuteronomy 30:19-20 I call the heavens and the earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live 20by loving the Lord your God, by listening to his voice, and by clinging to him, because that means life for you, and you will live a long life on your land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This is going to sound silly, but I want you to know that having this text before me on this day of worship is a total comfort, encouragement and marvel. Let me explain. For the 40 plus years that I have been serving the Lord God (note that is how I describe my job, I am the servant of the Lord God). My job is to represent him, to declare his Word in its truth and purity and, in the best way that God has given me, to encourage, guide and where necessary, discipline the souls placed into my care. Now, for that 40 years, for the vast majority of those years, I have chosen my sermon text on a rotational basis. Old Testament, Epistle Gospel…Old Testament, Epistle, Gospel. I do it that way because I believe for me, it keeps the full wonder and marvel of God’s Word always before me. It is much harder to simply preach what your rotation has placed before you, than it is to preach what you pick and choose for that Sunday.

Why do I tell you all of this? Because of the wonder of how God works. Again, I just told you how I determine what it is that I am going to preach on and yet look at the text that I get to preach on this Sunday! It is a text that challenges us in our faith. It is a text that calls upon us to determine what it is we are going to do when it comes down to the Lord God. In other words, this text makes a clear and precise distinction about what it means to be a believer of God! Now top that off with the fact that not just once, but in two Confirmation classes I ended up teaching the beginning of the 1st Article of the Apostle’s Creed. The first question under that Article is: “What does it mean when a Christian says, ‘I believe in God?”” Now add the real kicker to this: I have people upset at me because they chose to spurn the Lord God, but I am the villain for calling them out!

What does it mean when we say, “I believe in God?’ Did you know you could simply recite our Deuteronomy passage and have the answer to that question? Faith is more than just lip service. Faith is more than just going to church, but it is going to church. Faith is something precise and certain and yet faith is something that is of the heart. I know, now you are going to tell me that since faith, true faith is of the heart therefore I cannot and must not say that someone lacks faith. Yet didn’t Jesus tell us, **“By their fruit you will know them”?** And Jesus gave us lots of examples of what that specifically means. We will talk about some of that today. Our theme will be: **I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU LIFE AND DEATH!**

Listen again to our opening words. **“See now, today I have set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster. 16This is what I am commanding you today: Love the Lord your God, walk in his ways, and keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances. Then you will live and increase in number, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are going to possess.”** Dear people, here is the issue of faith and God. In many cases, you and I have a choice to make, sometimes more limited than you might grasp, but you and I have a choice.

We have before us “life and prosperity.” Please note I don’t call that a choice. You are alive and here, you are breathing and a part of this world because God has given life, physical life in this world. It is already something you have. And even when it comes down to “true life”, that is having faith and trust in God, please note that is also something that God has provides you with. He has given his Word. He has revealed his nature and love. He has invited you, equipped you and even says He will bless you when you simply acknowledge his reality and divinity in the life you have. And with that you have life, true life, spiritual life that will be forever.

We also have before us “death and disaster.” You can choose that! You can choose to walk away from God and in essence commit spiritual suicide. You can determine to ignore, despise, and reject the life God has given you, along with his offer of life and prosperity. Completely in your hands, this “choice” of rejecting God. And I say, “choice” with quotation marks because we do have to remember that our problem is that by nature we hate, despise and consider God our enemy. That is the fact of us.

So again, notice that God offers us himself and lots of wonders and benefits as we hold on to him or God says we can turn our back on him and take whatever the world has to offer. Again, I want to caution you. The world we live in, is indeed, also in the back pocket of Satan. It will work to deceive us and lead us away from God and his salvation. That’s why we are told to not love the world and the things of the world. In other words, as God’s children please note that we are going to have harder choices, more difficult lives simply because we are to be followers of God. Simple reminder from Jesus: “If they hated me, they will hate you too!” So God encourages us with these words: **“This is what I am commanding you today: Love the Lord your God, walk in his ways, and keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances. Then you will live and increase in number, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are going to possess.”**

Now, what you have to love about this text is that God wants to cover it all. So now the Lord says to us: **“But if your heart turns away, and you do not listen, and you are lured away, and you bow down to other gods and serve them, then I declare to you today that you will most certainly perish. You will not live a long life on the land you are about to enter and possess by crossing over the Jordan.”**

Yes, these words are addressed to the Israelites who are going to enter the promised land. God wants to bless them and protect them. God wants to adore and exalt them. But God lays down some parameters. God is serious in his intents.

If your heart turns away from the Lord, that is a problem. Don’t care about the Lord? Don’t care about his Word? That’s the next line: **“and you do not listen,”** that line is about the Word of God. We are to hear it, take it to heart, obey, believe, and trust it! I do not think I exaggerate when I say that God just couldn’t be any clearer? How you treat his Word, God will view as how you treat Him! I will illustrate this point this way. There you are, you have just met a new person. You look at them and say, “Hi, my name is Terry!” They respond, “Jimmy, how good to meet you!” You say, “No, my name is Terry.” They respond, “Look, Richard, don’t get hung up.” You say, “My name is T-E-R-R-Y, Terry!” They say, “Judy, it’s not a big deal, just go along with me.” Do you go along? Or are you already insulted and feeling quite disrespected by what this person is doing and it is clear they are doing it deliberately. Not listening to God’s Word is treating God in that very way!

And what does God say, **“If you…are lured away, and you bow down to other gods and serve them, then I declare to you today that you will most certainly perish.”** Again, I think that as clear as could be. When God tells us that this is what I am, who I am, what I demand, and what I will do for you and you simply ignore what He reveals are you really following the true God or have you been bought over by idols, by false gods, a god you have made up in your own mind? God did not reveal himself so we could ignore and be lured away. Note that God tells us exactly how He is going to react. Oh it is true, you can ignore what He says there too, but I do not want to be in your shoes.

Again, l love the clarity of God. After those very stark words He says, **“I call the heavens and the earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live by loving the Lord your God, by listening to his voice, and by clinging to him, because that means life for you, and you will live a long life on your land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”**

Again I like to reiterate the point here that you do not really choose life. Just the fact that God is speaking to you says you have life, the life He gave you. Really your choice is to continue to live. God is with you, blessing you, caring for you, loving you, all because He is God and he wants you to continue in the path He has given you, the path of life. In this case I believe these words could clearly be understood to refer to the gift of eternal life and salvation because that was the whole point of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to begin with. They, and you and me, have been chosen by God to be his children and heirs of eternal life. God’s son, even before the foundations of the world were laid, was promised as your Savior, the one who would die for your sin and grant you the wonderful gift of heaven. But to claim that gift is difficult.

How did our text again describe that life God wants to give? **“by loving the Lord your God.”** Again, this is not rocket science. We do understand the premise of love. I hope that all of you, if you knew someone who said, “I love you,” and then regularly beat you physically, I am hoping that you would grasp this is not love! Is it love to ignore? To despise, to belittle, to spurn, to curse and to behave as if this person is not worthy of your attention? I know your answer. The same is true of God. Don’t be running around with all those negatives toward God and then try to convince me you really, really love him. I once told a man who was very harsh with his wife, “Sir, I want nothing to do with your idea of love!” Love God in a true and right fashion.

God says again, that the path to life is, **“by listening to his voice.”** Yep, there it is again, that call to hear and believe his Holy Word. That is how God speaks to us. Seriously, if you think God is actually speaking and directing your life today, please, I beg you come and see me! You have a false god problem and we need to get it fixed! God gave us his Word. The Word is backed by the power and majesty of Jesus. There is no promise of God that he is going to speak to you and me directly. It is true that in history, God called men to be his prophets, men who were his spokesmen, but once the Word was written and completed we had all we needed. That’s why even Jesus taught, **“Let them listen to the Law and the Prophets.”**

Finally God says, **“You have life…by clinging to him.”** Mentally grab onto God and hold on. We’ve heard it so many different ways this truth. **“Fight the good fight.” “Pursue righteousness.” “Make the good confession.” “Make level paths for your feet.”** We could go on for quite a while with such phrases. Faith and being a part of faith is hard work.

Yet I want to be clear with you. You do not start or choose to have faith. We confess in the explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle Creed: *“I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord or come to him.”* Faith is a gift from God. If you believe in God all credit and glory goes to God. Our job, as we grasp this gift of faith, is to keep ourselves in the Word, hearing God’s truth, being reminded again and again of the Gospel truths of Jesus. That is how we are told that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and minds to strengthen and keep our faith alive and well. Our job is to stay in God’s Word, or as Jesus says here: we cling to him.

Any why not? Do we not grasp what has been done for us in Jesus? The fact that Jesus died for us, rose from the dead, and then established the Church to proclaim his wonder. Jesus and the Father continue to send into our lives the Holy Spirit who works through the gospel in Word and sacrament. I am saved in Jesus. I am changed in Jesus. Ephesians 4 says to us: **“But you did not learn Christ in that way, if indeed you have heard of him and were taught in him (since the truth is in Jesus). As far as your former way of life is concerned, you were taught to take off the old self, which is corrupted by its deceitful desires, and to be renewed continually in the spirit of your mind, and to put on the new self, which has been created to be like God in righteousness and true holiness.”** Again, that’s how we cling to Jesus. We practice what he teaches. We do not embrace sin as our right, but despair of the evils and falsehoods of this world that would destroy our trust in Jesus.

There is no doubt, this text is about faith. It is about being a child of God and an heir of eternal life. The challenge believers faced then is still the challenge you and I face today. Dear friends: Keep that life that God has given in Jesus. It is our only hope for eternal life. Amen.