

For delivery in Ogallala February 16, 2020

Reverend Hadler told me about the lectionary for today, as well as giving me permission to ignore it. Within Judaism, we also have a lectionary of sorts. Ours is designed to go through the entire Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) within a Jewish year. Some people take three years for this, and very traditionally (before the year 500 C.E. or so) communities would take as long as they wanted, reading as little or as much as made sense to them.

We don't get to skip something because it is, well, boring. We don't get to skip something because it no longer applies, either. So I have gotten quite used to finding the gems within the text.

This week's texts actually have a number of gems within them, as well as at least one thread that connects them.

The texts under discussion today are Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalms 119:1-8, First Corinthians 3:1-9 and Matthew 5:21-37.

Deuteronomy as a whole is one long speech by Moses, trying to hammer into the Israelites who were actually going into the land all the appropriate ways to behave so they would get to stay in the land for a long time. In the selection chosen for today, he emphasizes choosing life. "I have given you today the choice between life and death, between good and evil – therefore choose life." The choice that Moses lays out is paying attention to what God has been saying, or deciding to do what you want to do anyway.

Focusing on choosing life, over time, has enabled Judaism to survive. When somebody threatens your life unless you break some law of Judaism, there are only three instances where you must let them kill you. Idolatry, adultery and murder. This verse has also been used as the basis of the general rule "saving a life cancels everything else out." Which means – if there is a chance that a life may be saved, you must ignore the normal rules. One of the areas which has been very affected by this is organ transplants. During those years when organ transplants seemed to be more for surgeons to develop skills than useful in prolonging life, and given that there was a policy of burying every body part, Jews were discouraged from being organ donors. For several years now, since organ transplants are more often successful than not, being an organ donor is almost mandatory, as saving a life is more important than being buried whole.

Psalms 119 is very long. It's hard to tell in the English version, but the Hebrew version has eight verses per letter, in alphabetical order. So the selection for today is just the first letter of the alphabet. Within this first

letter, one of the points the Psalmist makes is that keeping the rules helps make sure that God does not forsake a person – as somebody who deliberately refuses to keep the rules has removed themselves from God's protection, as it were. One thing to remember is that there is no magic within Judaism (although there seem to be magical acts within the TaNaKH). I define magic, for this purpose, as doing something to coerce God to either do what you want or to avoid doing something you do not want to have done. God cannot be controlled by humans, which may be why Paul suggests in Corinthians that humans should not be the ones you follow. God should be the one you follow.

In the quotation from Matthew, Jesus lists a number of written rules and extends those rules beyond what is simply written. In this, what he does is much the same as what I, or any Rabbi of any generation might do. What is written is not ignored – but often it is used to help clarify other situations. Much like what I indicated earlier has been done with the choice Moses gave us between life and death.

So, to sum it all up: Moses begged us to choose life, and the Psalmist indicated that when we do choose life by following the rules, we will not feel like God has forsaken us. Paul indicates that it is better to not blindly follow humans and Jesus mentioned that the law is more complicated than you might otherwise think.