

Deut. 30:15-20 6th Sunday after Epiphany February 14, 1993

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I 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, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.

Try explaining that in a crowd of people standing and shouting, "We're number one!"

It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.

I guessing most of us have not heard that line recently, maybe some of the young among us have not heard it at all.

"How large is your church?" I am asked.

"About 460 members," I answer.

"Our church is larger," comes the reply.

"Are you growing?" "Adding lots of new members?" "Increasing attendance?"

All of that is shorthand for "Are you winning?"

No one even asks, "How are you playing the game - living the faith?" Because today the old saying has become, "It doesn't matter how you play the game, but whether you win."

Whether you can stay on top - make the headlines - beat the competition.

Buried in the Old Testament is an interesting story. King David took a census. He counted all the people of the nation of Israel. And the Lord was angered. The king counted his subjects, and the almighty God was upset. David forgot that his hope, his power, his shield

against the enemies of his people was the Lord. Whether few or many, the Lord could do the Lord's will through them.

But now God's people are obsessed with counting. How many in worship - how many belong - how many received communion - how much was given? - as if numbers can tell the story of God's people.

As Moses stood before the people of Israel just before he was to die and they were to enter the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, Moses spoke: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God and walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish, you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."

On what did the future depend? Numbers? Resources? Chariots? Horses? Armor? - On none of these. Everything depended upon a people loving the Lord and walking in the Lord's ways and obeying the Lord's commands.

Forty years earlier they had been desperate. Slaves. There was nothing they could do but trust God. Moses promised freedom if they would trust God. They trusted, for they had nothing to lose.

When the check book is empty, and there is no food on the table, why not trust God.

When death has nearly smothered your child, and the doctors have given up hope, where else can you turn but to God?

When your drinking has led to a crash landing at the very bottom, who could help but God?

But as soon as the swords of their former masters were no longer in sight, and Pharaoh's mighty soldiers were stinking corpses on the shores of the Red sea, the people started slipping away from faith in God.

Our intentions are good. We thought we would never forget the help God gave to us. But faith that was once burning and intense becomes lukewarm. We yawn as we pray, we start a sentence, and leave God waiting as our mind wanders off in another way. We forget the Lord

our God and start counting our resources. We put those many other god's in first place, in second place, in third place in our lives.

"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his commandments , then you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. "

For 45 years people have gathered on Sundays on this lot to worship the Lord. For 45 years we have loved God and walked in his ways and observed his commandments more or less.

The numbers have changed. Sometimes more, sometimes less. And sometimes the numbers have seemed to have a greater power over the future of the people of God in this place than God himself.

In crisis faith has been intense, and praying sincere.

When death has not seemed so near, we forget a little.

Today as we celebrate our 45th anniversary, we are like Israel, poised on the edge of the promised land. Before us stands life or death, trust in God and in the only Son of God Jesus Christ, or putting our hope in things that cannot finally save us. If we love the Lord our God and walk in God's ways, the blessings we will know are beyond counting, and endless, truly endless. And if we turn away, and let numbers rule over us, then God will have a much more difficult time with us.

But there is one important way we are different from Israel. We know that even if we should fail, God in Jesus Christ will not. He will win the only victory that will finally matter in us, and bring us to what eye has not seen nor ear heard, what God has prepared for God's children.

Thanks be to God.

