

## Deuteronomy 30:15-20

### **Life and death**

Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good versus death and what's wrong. If you obey the Lord your God's commandments that I'm commanding you right now by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them, I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live— by loving the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

## Matthew 5:6-12

### **Happy people**

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

## Hope for Humanity

I don't know about you, but I'm not one to make New Years Resolutions. But I do appreciate the idea – a resolve to make a positive change in one's life or situation. In today's reading from Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are resolving to accept the covenant and laws of the Lord that Moses has brought to them. If they choose to abide by the Covenant, then God promises to bless them and watch over them. But God warns them that if they choose to follow the ways of the world around them, following the gods of the other nations, it will poison them as a people and lead to their destruction. This is why God pleads with them to choose life because He knows the heartache that will befall his chosen people.

In today's Gospel reading in Matthew, through his skillful use of language Jesus also contrasts the way of the world to the way of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew Myer Boulton, Professor of Theology at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis rewrote the Beatitudes the way the world would have it:

Blessed are the rich, in things and in self-assurance.

Blessed are those untouched by loss.

Blessed are the powerful.

Blessed are those who are "realistic" about righteousness, compromising at every turn.

Blessed are those who demand an exact an eye for an eye.

Blessed are the crafty and opportunistic.

Blessed are those bold enough to make war.

Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive many accolades.

Blessed are those who, following Jesus, are widely praised and adored.

Doesn't this version sound more realistic than Jesus' version? Professor Boulton doesn't think so; and neither do I. Jesus gave his beatitudes to dispel the everyday illusions, to clarify reality, to declare the dawning reign of God, and to help us find our bearings as we live into God's future. God's reality.

In the beatitudes of Jesus, he gives us an atlas of "not yet's" filled with hope and foretastes of heaven.

In the first half of the last century, humanity experienced two world wars that killed millions of people on five continents. After the devastation, it became easier for people to take the hopeful words of the Beatitudes to heart. Perhaps its because when you are at the bottom, you can only look upwards. It is during times of such desolation that we forget that God is there with us in the midst of our despair.

Poet and professor **Christian Wiman** knows that feeling of despair. After being diagnosed with an incurable blood cancer, only one year into his marriage, he was inspired to write his poem, *Every Riven Thing*. The word “riven” is an old word that speaks of brokenness, of what is rent asunder. Throughout his piece, Wiman repeats the phrase “God goes belonging to every riven thing he’s made.” I want to play his reading of this poem.

[Play *Every Riven Thing*]

[Black] Since World War II, when humanity began to follow the advice of the Most High to “choose life,” God has blessed us with more advances than perhaps any other time in human history.

We tend to look negatively on what is happening in our world today – and I get that! The news media inundates us with negativity. Wars, impeachment, homelessness it is real, but the reality is that it is not normal – that’s what makes it newsworthy! Because of our depressing world view, on New Year’s eve, New York Times Columnist, **Nicholas Kristof wrote a piece entitled *Why 2019 has been the best year in human history***. Kristof gets a lot of his information from the website *Our World in Data*, run by Max Roser, an Oxford University economist. I’m going to read you portions of what he wrote:

The bad things that you fret about are true. But it’s also true that since modern humans emerged about 200,000 years ago, 2019 was probably the year in which children were least likely to die, adults were least likely to be illiterate and people were least likely to suffer excruciating and disfiguring diseases.

Every single day in recent years, another 325,000 people got their first access to electricity. Each day, more than 200,000 got piped water for the first time.

Historically, almost half of all humans died in childhood. As recently as 1950, 27% of all children still died by age 15. Now that figure has dropped to about 4%.

Every day for a decade, newspapers could have carried the headline “Another 170,000 moved out of extreme poverty yesterday.”

Many of those moving up are still very poor, of course. But because they are less poor, they are less likely to remain illiterate or to starve: People often think that famine is routine, but the last famine recognized by the World Food Program struck just part of one state in South Sudan and lasted for only a few months in 2017.

Diseases like polio, leprosy, river blindness and elephantiasis are on the decline, and global efforts have turned the tide on AIDS. Half a century ago, a majority of the world’s people had always been illiterate; now we are approaching 90% adult literacy.

Yes, it’s still appalling that a child dies somewhere in the world every six seconds — but consider that just a couple of decades ago, a child died every three seconds. Recognizing that progress is possible can be a spur to do more, and that’s why I write this annual reminder of gains against the common enemies of humanity.

“Three things are true at the same time,” says Roser, the economist. “The world is much better, the world is awful, the world can be much better.”

In his book, *One Hundred Tons of Ice and Other Gospel Stories*, Pastor Lawrence Wood of Fremont United Methodist Church in Fremont, Michigan wrote a chapter entitled, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In it he tells of the Quaker preacher, Edward Hicks. Hicks was unusual because he was a preacher – which was not common among Quakers, but he was also a painter who painted copy after copy of **this work, called *The Peaceable Kingdom***. It was inspired by **Isaiah 11:6**:

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them.

In Hicks' painting you can see the various animals, along with children in the foreground, but in the background is a depiction of William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania and a Quaker, concluding a treaty with the Delaware Native Americans. It is said that Penn paid the tribe for their land and wrote rules for their fair treatment. This may be the only treaty between Native Americans and Christians that was never broken.

Lawrence Wood wrote in his book, "I suppose we all want a world like this painting,... when all God's creatures will live within their differences. This is what many people mean by the kingdom of God." He goes on, "The kingdom comes in fractions, in eighths and sixteenths and denominations, and it has always been so. Ever since the very start of Christianity, when Paul, Peter, and James worked out their differences, which were reflected in distinctive congregations, we have been inching along toward the will of God.

Not that this is a bad thing. Some Christians worry over our "divided witness," but I do not particularly regret it. It allows us to reach a greater variety of people....

What bothers me is when Christians within churches fight. It never happens over our missions or witness, but instead over petty or peripheral things. Friends stop speaking to each other, or speak bitterly. They may pretend to obey a shepherd, but tear at each other like lions or wolves."

Wood concluded this segment by writing, "When we set our minds on the needs of others, it's impossible for us to be divided, and even in our churches the wolf and lamb, the calf and the lion, can lie down together.... The kingdom comes in fractions, but it comes. God's will is done on earth when his people set their minds on the needs of others."

[Hope for Humanity] Friends, the evidence is clear, when we honor our Creator by focusing on the needs of all people – whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist or atheist - and when we are being good stewards of the earth; then the Supreme Being graciously responds by moving humanity closer to the kingdom of heaven. I pray that we may always choose life, so that we may live in the name and the way of Jesus. Amen.