

## God's Fidelity Assured- Deuteronomy 30:1-20

**30** When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup>and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, <sup>3</sup>then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup>Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world,<sup>[a]</sup> from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. <sup>5</sup>The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.

<sup>6</sup>Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. <sup>7</sup>The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you. <sup>8</sup>Then you shall again obey the LORD, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today,<sup>9</sup>and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, <sup>10</sup>when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

### Exhortation to Choose Life

<sup>11</sup>Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. <sup>12</sup>It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" <sup>13</sup>Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may

hear it and observe it?" <sup>14</sup>No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

<sup>15</sup>See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup>If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God<sup>[b]</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>I 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,<sup>20</sup> loving 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.

## Paul Thanks God for the Colossians

<sup>3</sup>In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup>for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup>because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. <sup>7</sup>This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.<sup>[a]</sup> He is a faithful minister of Christ on your<sup>[b]</sup> behalf, <sup>8</sup>and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

<sup>9</sup>For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's<sup>[c]</sup> will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup>so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. <sup>11</sup>May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled<sup>[d]</sup> you<sup>[e]</sup> to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup>He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.<sup>[f]</sup>

**July 10, 2016**

**Deuteronomy 30; Colossians 1:3-14**

**The Word is Very Near You**

**Kerra Becker English**

In her book that ties together indigenous wisdom and the teachings of nature called, Braiding Sweetgrass, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, *“The Windigo is the legendary monster of our Anishinaabe people, the villain of a tale told on freezing nights in the north woods. You can feel it lurking behind you, a being in the shape of an outsized man, ten feet tall, with frost-white hair hanging from its shaking body. With arms like tree trunks, feet as big as snowshoes, it travels easily through the blizzards of the hungry time, stalking us. The hideous stench of its carrion breath poisons the clean scent of snow as it pants behind us. Yellow fangs hang from its mouth that is raw where it has chewed off its lips from hunger. Most telling of all its heart is made of ice.”* (Braiding Sweetgrass, p. 304)

The Windigo legends are told in the dead of winter, in starvation times, the times when desperate circumstances could create in the tribe itself a monster so ravenously hungry that his appetite would never be satisfied. We see such dissatisfaction arise today as addictions and obsessions of all kinds prevent us from living a fulfilled kind of life. The more we get, it seems, the more we want to have. Being bitten by the Windigo dooms the victim to turn into one himself – thereby carrying on that eternal pain of need. “Consumed by consumption,” Kimmerer writes, “it lays waste to humankind.... Windigo is the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than anything else.” (p. 305)

That dark and selfish hunger within us is not new. Expanding and consuming without regard for others is considered monstrous to the indigenous mindset, and our own scriptures

outline serious consequences for those who refuse to keep within check of God's designated limitations. But rather than locate the monster inside by telling stories about the monster outside, the Hebrew people understood that God's power could be unleashed on them in monstrous ways if they became lax about following God's law.

The law of the Old Testament mostly comes in the form of commandments and elaborations on those commandments. God's word for God's chosen people is revealed to Moses through the Ten Commandments given on Mount Sinai. Legal codes that appear as long diatribes of dos and don'ts in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy don't have the same oomph as the big Ten, but are meant to bring people together under common assumptions about where their rights stopped and their neighbors' rights began. And the people believed, as we often still do now, that obedience to the law would bring showers of blessing, and disobedience to the law would bring wallopings of biblically epic proportions. In fact, that's how the text describes it more often than not. IF you and your children obey God's law, THEN the Lord will restore your fortune and have compassion on you. But IF you DON'T obey God's law, THEN there will be punishments. Your adversaries will win against you; your land will not produce; your good fortune will go away.

Most religion, be it tribal or textual, begins this way. There's a story, a law, a teaching or parable that is designed to get you to behave in a particular way – and its motivation may either be reward or punishment. Good things happen if you obey; bad things happen if you don't. Sometimes we use our outside world as a barometer of such things in the reverse. Rich people, happy people must also be good people. And those who experience suffering must have done something wrong. Now it can be true that consequences bear this out – except when they don't. This chapter in Deuteronomy tells us that we have a choice to make, life and prosperity or death and adversity. I've known those for whom this does seem to be a choice, but also, I've run across

people who've had their circumstances chosen for them either as some sort of cosmic lottery or extreme bad luck. So what is it that these if-then statements are supposed to be telling us? Can we really control our own destiny with certain modifications of our behavior? And if so, how then is our behavior important to God?

Too often I've seen these concepts of pure obedience used in unhelpful ways. When it's about the tedium of following the law to its letter, and then calling only "those" people good, I think we've missed an important point. In this chapter, the Mosaic tradition is telling us something much more complex about the word of God, the commandment that gives life in its fullest. Surely, the commandment that is given by a loving God won't be too hard, and won't require a lengthy quest or a heavenly opening for us to receive it. Rather, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

The model for Hebraic behavior modification is the reminder that God's values are put so very close to you that they are immediately available to you on your lips and in your heart. You can't - not know them. They involve God's particularly fierce love for you, and they raise the expectation that you are not alone in your situation. You are ultimately dependent on the rest of your people. That's why it's so very, very important to teach this law to your children and write it on your heart. It matters to the most vulnerable in your society and makes you responsible for their care as just as important as your own. Fearing the Windigo monster is not so very far away from this concept.

In executing this very important law, God calls heaven and earth as witnesses. Heaven knows if you've taken too much or lived in such a way as to violate your neighbor. Earth bears the scars of expansion and consumption run amuck. God is concerned about our behavior,

because our behavior toward others has far reaching consequences – sometimes even more far reaching than we can imagine or understand on our own. The Hebrew prophets, like Moses, and those who followed thereafter in his footsteps were aware that living as a people, as a nation, would mean the need for individual boundaries and limits, in order to make living well possible for those who might not otherwise be protected, the widows, the orphans, the immigrants, the strangers. The taboo against exploitation of the most fragile in society was at the very heart of their system of justice. They had their own Windigo, but it came in the form of God's wrath and retribution toward Israel.

We sometimes find this troubling in our modern sensibilities, and in our Christian sensibilities. It's not popular in most of our circles to believe that God is condemning the nation or scorching the earth to prove a point about human depravity. But maybe it's because we don't want to see that our behaviors do send out ripples in the rest of the world. Though it may not need to be based on fear or disobedience as a motivator, being for Christ also means choosing to live within limits because there are significant consequences we face when we don't. To choose life and prosperity not only for ourselves, but for the good of the whole, we have to put restraints upon our own expansion and consumption. We cannot continue to be blind to the fact that our comfortable lifestyles are made possible, in part, by the adversity and common deaths of those we consider less important than ourselves. When you choose kindness, it puts limitations on cruelty. When you choose justice, it limits oppression. When you choose love, our hates and prejudices have to go elsewhere – perhaps into that 10 foot tall imaginary monster who we don't want hanging around the outskirts of the city anymore. But our world will always offer us the temptation to care more for our own survival than anything else. Some of Jesus' disciples were horrified that he wasn't the conquering hero they expected him to be. It was his absolute failure,

his death in shame that seemed all for naught, that released him to be the carrier of our sins and the giver of eternal life. Rather than be afraid of an external monster, we recognize our internal monster that hangs with Jesus on the cross to be transformed from death and adversity into life and prosperity – the fulfillment of Hebrew law. Jesus chose life – but the pathway to that life was through the muck and mire of our earthly existence.

The moral of the Jesus story, the one that moves us past our fears of the boogeyman, and beyond the paranoia of following the intricacies of the law to its letter, is that the word, meaning: the love of God, was very near to him. It was in his heart and on his lips in absolutely everything he did and said. That doesn't mean that he was absent the consequences of an earthly life. No, he actually suffered, greatly, the consequences of human darkness. He fought back against the legalisms of his church. He was put to death through the cruelties of the state. He always sympathized with the oppressed and challenged those who had power and control, and so it led him into facing the worst kinds of adversity and punishment that humanity had to dish out.

The religious impulse, in all its variety and forms of instruction, is always teaching us, and when we pay close attention, it is always moving us closer to the truth as we are able to see it. Sometimes we need to fear the bite of the Windigo. Sometimes we need to know that there will be consequences for disobeying the law. Sometimes we need to go deeper into our own imitation of Christ and allow the monsters of the world to come to us because we are no longer afraid for our survival. All these stories and laws are meant to move us nearer to God so that love will be what's in our hearts, that truth will be what's on our lips, because that's the best, the very best of who we are and who we were meant to be. Amen.

"The Romero Prayer"

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Bishop Ken Untener