

## Choosing Life

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### Gathering

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*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.*

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **green cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in “ordinary” time. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

#### **Listen - Choose Life (Trish Watts)**

*As we come to worship today, you might like to listen to this song from Trish Watts - the words are from one of our readings today and invite us into thinking about the choices we make...*

Choose life, that you and your children may live, may live.

Choose life, that you and your children may live.

I set before you life and death.

I set before you blessing and choice.

Choose life, that you and your children may live.

*Words and Music: Trisha Watts*

#### **Welcome**

Welcome!

My name is Kath, and it is my privilege to share in ministry with you in this place.

Whether you come here often or whether this is an occasional or even first time visit, you are welcome.

*After the service, please stay for morning tea so we can get to know one another better.*

*Our community is richer and stronger together.*

#### **Light Candle**

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

#### **Acknowledgement of Country**

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples.

From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

We pay our respects to their Elders and Leaders, past and present and emerging, and we pray for the future of their communities.

May we walk gently and respectfully on this Land.

*(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here*



*Urban Pioneer, photo by Andy Levin.  
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## Call to Worship

As God's people wait in the wilderness, they are free from slavery but not yet home. God speaks through Moses, reminding them again of their part in the covenant God has already made with them:

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the Lord your God, obeying [God], and holding fast to [God]; for that means life to you.

*Deuteronomy 30:19-20*

God of our deepest yearnings,  
give us devoted hearts that seek to once more are ready to listen, think, and feel.  
Open in us the wisdom of Jesus,  
with the courage needed to travel his life-giving road. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Epiphany 6, 12 February 2023, p.170*

## Sing - Praise The God Who Changes Places (TIS 178)

*Today we are thinking about the interplay between choices and freedom. So we sing a song of praise to the one who invites us to make choices that are life-giving, freeing!*

Praise the God who changes places,  
leaves the lofty seat,  
welcomes us with warm embraces,  
stoops to wash our feet.

*Friends be strong!*

*Hold your heads high!*

*Freedom is our song! Alleluia!*

Praise the Breath of Love, whose freedom  
spreads our waking wings,  
lifting every blight and burden  
till the spirit sings:

*Friends be strong!*

*Hold your heads high!*

*Freedom is our song! Alleluia!*

Praise the rabbi, speaking, doing  
all that God intends,  
dying, rising, faith renewing,  
calling us his friends.

*Friends be strong!*

*Hold your heads high!*

*Freedom is our song! Alleluia!*

Praise, until we join the singing  
far beyond our sight,  
with the Ending-and-Beginning,  
dancing in the light.

*Friends be strong!*

*Hold your heads high!*

*Freedom is our song! Alleluia!*

Words: Brian Wren  
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## Prayer

God of grace,  
we praise you this morning as you come amongst us,  
we praise you for the beauty that surrounds us - in creation, in community,  
we praise you for safety and friendship and hope,  
found here in the midst of the gathering of your people.  
We give thanks for the abundance we enjoy,  
and we allow ourselves to become aware of the responsibilities that come with it.

## Prayer - God of Covenant (on reading Deuteronomy) [adapted]

God, you have become known to us,  
not in abstract theologies,  
but in action –

specifically, the in your act of salvation [- for us and the world.]  
Your people cried out from their bondage,  
you heard –  
and their cries caused such an upheaval in you  
that they could not be borne in silence and inaction.  
You led them across the sea and away from their captors.

You then became known to us in the gift of torah:  
Not a legal code meant to lock us unto airtight boxes,  
But a sweet gift to give us the freedom to become,  
Even as you allowed the world to become:  
A creation that knew light from dark, day from night,  
And could live in the harmony of the changing seasons.  
We confess that we have, so often, forgotten the rhythms of that harmony,  
Or have made harmony into dry rules and regulations  
To sap life from people.

[God, you have also become known to us in the rabbi, Jesus,  
your son,  
who called his disciples to life  
and revealed the breadth of your love  
dying, rising, faith renewing.]

As we study your Story today,  
Let us once again thrill to the cadences of freedom –  
from slavery, from false expectations,  
from rampant individualism that has no concern for the beautiful creation of community.  
Thank you for covenant, God of relationship.

Merryl Blair

<https://worshipwords.co.uk/god-of-covenant-on-reading-deuteronomy-merryl-blair-australia/>

Breath of Love,  
your freedom enables us to spread our wings  
and to be free from the blight and burdens we so often carry.  
As we sing your song, may our words and our actions bring freedom and life,  
in the name of your son, Jesus, we pray,  
today and always. Amen.

**Sing** - The Anointing (Seasons 9-32)

*This song might be new to some, but we have heard it on and off over the past couple of years. Let's see if we can sing it together. (v1 and chorus and then start again)*

*Lead us to listen,  
to hear the heart speak.  
O God in the quiet voice,  
draw us to you.  
Awaken our wisdom,  
enlighten our vision.  
Anoint us to heal  
and to love as you do.*

Give us faith that is strong,  
give us hope that is bright.  
May the small voice be our concern,  
may we make burdens light.  
*Lead us to listen...*

May we be slow to judge,  
may we learn to forgive.  
Through compassion and kindness,  
may we let others live.  
*Lead us to listen...*

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## Listening for God's Voice

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### Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

<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 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.

### Reading: Matthew 5:21-37

<sup>21</sup> 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup> 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

<sup>31</sup> 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup> 'Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God!**

## Reflection

Explorer of our hearts, discerner of our souls, we invite you into the depths of our struggles.

We open the locked doors.

With words of love and boldness of truth, we ask you to knock on the hardest places of our hearts and soften them so we may love you and love our neighbours. Amen

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Epiphany 6, 12 February 2023, p.168*

What brings you life?

Maybe it is a swim in the ocean or a walk in the bush.

Maybe it is your family around you or a meal shared with friends.

Maybe, too, it is time spent reading and pondering the Scriptures or praying or singing some rousing hymns.

What brings you life?

The readings before us today, invite us into an interplay between the law and life.

That reading from Matthew 5 is hard to hear and it is no accident that those who put the lectionary together put it alongside the passage from Deuteronomy 30.

As we consider the words of Jesus, we need to hear them alongside what he has already been saying to us in the previous part of Matthew 5 as well as what is said in the Hebrew scriptures in which Jesus was deeply immersed.

The writers of the torah, put the words we heard in the first reading in the mouth of Moses, as Moses says farewell to the people he has led out of Egypt and through the wilderness, to the people who will now go on without him to the land God has promised.

Moses reminds them of God's covenant with them, and of their responsibilities under that covenant - walk in the ways God has shown you, keep God's commandments, that path will lead to life. But if you forget, if you take another path, it will lead to suffering and death. And so before you is a choice - and he implores them to choose life - not just for their own sake but for the sake of their families and the generations to come (30:19).

What happened, then, over centuries, is that the law, God's commandments, became rigid. And by the time Jesus is teaching, he is speaking to a world where a person's righteousness was measured by the degree to which you were able to keep the law.

So, remember last week, Jesus speaks about being salt and light in the world. And he encourages us to reach for righteous-justice which is expressed not only in keeping the letter of the law but in practical expressions of love and care for others - offering food and clothing and protection to people who are more vulnerable in our communities, and attending to the systems of our society that oppress or exclude, flavouring and illuminating the world with hope and healing.

So it is from that point that Jesus continues, in the confronting terms we have just heard. And, when we look closely, we see again that what Jesus is saying is that it is not keeping the letter of the law that is important, it is keeping its essence. And he uses examples that come from the foundational commandments, the 10 Commandments given by God to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 20).

Murder is horrendous, but, he says, it is not just about murder, we need to attend to the anger and the insults that are the spark to behaviour that ends in that kind of tragedy (5:21-22).

If you have an issue, a disagreement, with someone, then sort it out - don't let it fester until it explodes - usually in an unhelpful way - go to your brother or sister and have an honest and open conversation about what it is bothering you (5:23-26) - listen to each other and seek a resolution.

So too with adultery - its not just the act of sleeping with someone else's wife - but it starts when you look at a woman with lust (5:27-28). And here we need to remember that Jesus at this point is mainly speaking to men. And I want us to notice that Jesus places responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the men doing the lusting - there is no reference here to women dressing in certain ways or leading men on - this is all about taking responsibility for our own thoughts, emotions and responses and ensuring they are kept under control.

Most commentators agree that Jesus' use of an extreme response in tearing your eye out or cutting an arm off (5:29-30) is used for emphasis - in no way did Jesus expect us to take that literally but he did expect us to respond strongly and intentionally to control our propensity to make ill-considered choices.

Jesus teaching on divorce (5:31-32) has also caused much angst. Here again it is important to understand the context and time - Jesus speaks into a system that allowed men to divorce their wives and it seems that men were seeking, and being granted divorce, without any reason except, perhaps, that the husband had grown tired of his wife. That might be OK for us today but this was a time when if a man divorced his wife then he was no longer required to care for her or protect her. If she had no other family who would take her in, she was effectively abandoned; and many wouldn't take a divorced woman in because her divorce brought shame on the family. Jesus is saying, adultery is one thing, but you don't get to toss your wife out just because you have decided you don't want her around any more.

Now before I go on, I need to make a couple of things clear.

In today's world, legally, divorce is available to us without needing to give a reason.

The breakdown of any marriage is complex and painful for everyone involved and the community that surrounds them.

But if a relationship is endangering someone's health in any way - physically, emotionally, spiritually - then it is absolutely appropriate to seek help and, if it can't be resolved, to end that relationship. And that divorce then does not prevent anyone, in time, from finding and building a new relationship.

Lastly, Jesus speaks to swearing of oaths and vows (see Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21). Again, it is not about whether our commitment is embellished with a vow - it is whether we do what we say. So - say "yes" or "no" - the rest is superfluous.

SO what might we take from all this?

In addition to the specifics Jesus gives, there is an over-arching sense he is trying to evoke in us.

Every moment of every day, we are faced with choices - and sometimes, we have to make several choices all at the one time from a range of options.

We all know that in today's world, sometimes the number of options can be almost overwhelming, and the implications of our options (practical, ethical or moral) are not always clear.

Sometimes the choices we are faced with are big - moving house, changing careers, choosing a life-partner or, indeed, ending a relationship.

Sometimes the choices might seem trivial in comparison, but can nevertheless be paralysing.

I remember when I came back home after living in Asia for 3 years, I went to the supermarket to do a bit of a shop and I got to the breakfast cereal aisle. I stood at the top of the aisle gazing down what seemed to me to be an endless array of boxes, and I was unable to move. So many choices of breakfast cereal - I hadn't seen anything like it in the time I had been away. I bought some bread for toast and went home...

A few weeks later, since I was almost broke, I decided that instead of buying a car, I would buy a bicycle. So I went to a bike shop in Warrawong and again, was overwhelmed by the number of bikes available - I just wanted one with pedals and brakes!

Some would say we are blessed with choice!

We might also say we are cursed with the number of choices we have or, at least, the number of people trying to tell us what choices we should make - what will make us happy, or make us feel good.

But I wonder how often we are conscious of the choices we are making?  
How often do we stop and ask ourselves what is motivating our choices?  
And what happens when we stop and ask, will this bring life?

And it goes even further - it is not just about whether a particular choice will bring life to me as an individual, God's instruction through Moses is clear that it is about making choices that will bring life to the people around me and the generations to come.

So what choices are you making?

And how do you make them?

Will you try, as you go about your days this week, as you are confronted with options, ask yourself, what will bring life? Is this life-giving - to me and to the world around me?

I am grateful that you make the choice to come here and gather with the people of God. I am hopeful that we choose together to be salt and light in our communities and to work as hard as we can to follow the path Jesus has shown us.

Together, we choose to gather around this table where, in symbol and sign, we are reminded of that path, a path of self-giving and loving; where, bread and juice speak to us and to the world of generosity, grace and life in abundance.

Choose life - so you and the world around you will know of the life to which God calls us.

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## Responding

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**Listen** - Choose Life!

*As we come to prayer the world, let's listen again to the invitation to "Choose Life"*

**Prayer for Others** (Helen Laidlaw)

Loving God,

Each of us has different knowledge of who you are – That eternal Mystery who created our beautiful world and gave us life. We are all unique and we know that you require us to accept and love each other. Sometimes this is not easy and we need your help to forgive and see others as you see them. Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote a wonderful prayer which included: *People are often unreasonable and self-centred. Forgive them anyway.*

Thank you for this reminder that we are not working for our church or our community but firstly we are doing God's work in the world.

We ask your blessings on all the people of this church who work so tirelessly to make things run smoothly – Rev Kath, Parish Council, the Elders, music group & musicians – and so many others who run groups, produce the news sheets, and organise our morning teas. Flowers, cleaning, counting money – all are important.

*We pray for those who suffer.*

The almost unbelievable number of dead in the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria have left us all shaken, and please show us how we can offer assistance to the grief-stricken survivors. As we watch the news we see so many countries which have corrupt governments, or where there is street turmoil as two groups fight for power. We pray for Peru, Iran, the Congo. We also pray for the many women in our world whose rights are being removed, or who live under oppressive male domination.

We pray for the peacemakers in this world of war and aggression and cruelty – may your Holy Spirit infuse them with your power. May justice rule in so many unjust and genocidal situations.

May we be peacemakers in our own circle of family and church and community – forgiving and actively moving out of our self-centred ways.

We also pray for the families of the many people who have drowned in the last few weeks in Australian seas and waterways.

We pray for your comfort for parents who have lost a child, either in an accident or with serious illness.

We pray for those whose lives have been decimated by floods – and we ask that our scientists and politicians make good decisions in combating climate change.

We also pray for the people who weep for wasted opportunities, and help them hope for the future.

Be with those who are those suffering from long term illnesses and we claim Jesus' promise that they shall be comforted. We thank you when healing occurs, and for the lifting of burdens. So often we forget to thank you!

As Australians, help us to understand the injustices which have been suffered by our aboriginal people – our First People – and work towards righting wrongs and developing new strategies. As the controversy continues about the Voice and the referendum, help us to be your voice. Only you can show us how to do this, and work in a community which is sometimes unaware or uncaring.

Help us to measure our lives against the pattern of JESUS CHRIST, OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR, and depend on you at all times – both good and bad. Amen



## **Sing - Be God's (Seasons 9-10)**

*We started to learn this song a couple of weeks ago. I think it captures Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 in a really creative way. Remember, in the verses, you just come in on the parts in yellow, and then we all sing the chorus together.*

*Today, as we come to the table, it invites us to embody the symbol we celebrate - just as the bread is a sign of Christ's body reminding us of God's love, so our body's can be living signs of God's love in the world.*

*Where the world is merciless, be God's mercy.*

*Where the world is hopeless, be God's hope.*

*Where there is injustice, be God's justice.*

*Where there is sadness, be God's joy.*

*Where the world is doubting, be God's faith.*

*Where there is ingratitude, be God's grace.*

*Where there is confusion, be God's truth.*

*Where there is weakness, be God's strength.*

*Let your life change the world one person at a time.*

*Let your life be the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*As the bread becomes his body, we can be the living sign.*

*With God's love, change the world with your life.*

*Where the world is wounded, be God's healing.*

*Where the world is weeping, be God's song.*

*Where there is despairing, be God's beauty.*

*Where the world is crumbling, be God's rock.*

*Where there is no tenderness, be God's child.*

*Where there is loneliness, be God's smile.*

*Where the world is dying, be God's life.*

*Where there is darkness, be God's light.*

*Let your life change the world... (x2)*

*Words and music: Danielle Rose.  
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## **Holy Communion**

*If you would like to share in Communion and are unable to join with us in-person, please let Rev Kath or Rhonda Back know. We would love to bring Communion to you in your home at a time that suits you.*

## **Offering**

*As we have received, so we consider our response...*

*We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our response.*

*As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we have encountered the living Christ.*

*And if this is your first time with us or if you are visiting, please don't feel obliged to give.*

*You are our guests, and we want you simply to enjoy the blessings of worshiping together.*

*We are glad you are here!*

*Let us pray...*

Generous God,  
we offer only a part of the abundance we are privileged to enjoy.  
May the gifts we offer here be used to bring life to the world.  
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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### Sending

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**Sing** - God Give Us A Future (TIS 687)

*The first line of this hymn reminds us that God is committed to us, giving us hope and a future.*

*The last line is a prayer that God will continue to nudge us until we choose God's life knowing that that is where we will find our future.*

God gives us a future,  
daring us to go  
into dreams and dangers  
on a path unknown.  
We will face tomorrow  
in the Spirit's power,  
we will let God change us,  
for new life starts now.

We must leave behind us  
sins of yesterday,  
for God's new beginning  
is a better way.

Fear and doubt and habit  
must not hold us back:  
God gives hope, and insight,  
and the strength we lack.

Holy Spirit, teach us  
how to read the signs,  
how to meet the challenge  
of our troubled times.  
Love us into action,  
stir us into prayer,  
till we choose God's life, and  
find our future there.

*Words: © E.J. Smith*

### **Sending and Blessing**

Go, knowing you are held by love,  
sustained in hope,  
and equipped for the ministry you are called to.  
And the blessing of God,  
divine mystery, divine Word, divine presence  
be with you this day and forevermore.  
Amen

Rev Kath Merrifield  
12 February 2023