

Welcome

I'm the type of person that loves stories. I want to hear stories. I want to be a listener. My son is different and I have to find ways to communicate with him. I found out that through music, he's more willing to listen about the past if he hears it in a song than just me sitting him down and giving a history lesson. Sometimes we'll listen to music that addresses an issue or expresses a feeling.

Music is one way people from different generations can connect with one another.

What's your favorite song? Is there a throwback song that you love to listen to? Does this song bring you back to a certain time, place, or memory?

Certain songs have become a statement that represents a specific generation. These songs usually are inspired by being counter cultural and have a rebellious attitude. These songs may call out the political, social, and financial landscape. It may have an empowering message of how to rise up over political, social, and financial injustices and oppression, even to break generational curses and trauma. There's Creedence Clearwater Revival's song "Fortunate Son" that was released in 1969 that spoke of the hypocrisy of the privileged and wealthy sending others less fortunate off to war. There's the song "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke that speaks of racial segregation. This song was used for the Civil Rights movement. Songs can connect people in the midst of oppression and can be powerful to unite and inspire.

Music has a way of creating a multigenerational connection. It's like a flashback.

Today, we'll see how looking back can help us to discern how to go forward. Retrospection can help us learn how God connects with the current generation and what is planned for the generation yet to come. God provides various lenses to discern by, so in turn we return back to become what we were intended to be as God's people.

God's way of connecting is allowing us to be who we are. God allows us to express our joys and frustrations. God hears the songs that we sing and shout. It could be rebellious music and feeling like an outcast of punk music. It could be the longing of a calmer life and being outdoors riding a horse in country music. It could be soulful rhythm and blues music that the Black community created in times of segregation - music that strengthened their community and identity.

God wants us to listen to the oldies, the classics. When we hear the stories and songs from past generations, we are brought into God's story. Listening to and learning from the past generations helps us discern the way forward as God's people.

On that note, I want to invite you to sing with us. Nathan is going to lead us in songs of God's people. Let's stand and sing together!

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany, a season when we ask what it means that Jesus is for the whole world. We are Jesus' church, but Jesus isn't just for us. He's for the whole world. So what's our role in Jesus' mission?

This year, our series is called Spark! We're exploring the ways Jesus ignites our calling. What does it take to be the Church Jesus calls us to be?

It might seem counterintuitive, but to answer those questions, we're going to be spending time with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for this series. Men who lived out God's calling among God's people.

Because the God who created and cared for this special people thousands of years ago is the same God who arrived in the person of Jesus that first Christmas, and is the same God who gathered us for worship today!

We met Isaiah's Servant, that ideal human who perfectly embodies God's call on us. We saw that God calls us to be faithful, not effective. And we saw how the Servant stands with the marginalized because that's where God is.

For the next several weeks, we explored the relationship between religious practices and how we love our neighbors.

Today, we'll learn about how God connects with the current generation and what is planned for the generation yet to come. We'll hear from God's messenger Moses who tells the people of Israel to rechoose life so their wandering can end. God's people are in exile after being freed from the bonds of Pharaoh's rule. The book of Deuteronomy is written after God's people have returned from the Babylonian exile. In both times, God's people must reimagine life away from bondage, hardship, and death.

Today God calls us to reimagine our current context of the world. How would it feel to be free from the bondages of economic, social, and political inequality? What does life look like when we choose life that is in sync with a God who is gracious and loving?

Turn with us to Deuteronomy 30.

Deuteronomy is set at the end of a 40-year period God's people spent living as nomads in a wilderness. It's a speech their leader Moses gave, a speech that remembers what God's people have been through and reveals how they will continue on in the new land they are about to occupy. Moses acknowledges that God's people can be hard-hearted, choosing life away from God. Some of their sinful choices were creating and worshiping a golden calf, wanting to return back to captivity, and constantly doubting God even after the miracles they've witnessed.

The generation Moses is addressing in Deuteronomy has been in exile wandering the desert for 40 years. They've grown up as nomads. But now they're about to enter into a new reality - settling a land and becoming farmers. A new reality with new temptations, new obstacles. So Moses warns them:

“Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster...”

This language of “now listen” and “today” speaks of the present, the moment right now. Sometimes it's difficult to make decisions on the spot. Think about when someone asks, “What do you feel like eating?” My son and I take forever and sometimes we just have to go by asking rapid fire questions. “Do you want to cook or eat out? Eat out. Chicken or beef? Beef. Steak or burgers? Burgers. Smitty's or Cosmos? Cosmos.”

It's difficult sometimes to make a decision about food. Think about other decisions you have to make that aren't based on making your tummy happy. Should I buy those shoes or pay my bills? Should we visit family over the holiday or go to Disney World? Should I take that job out of state or stay near family and friends? Do I help my neighbor or relax on my day off?

Decisions can also affect people beyond your social group and communities. Do I vote to increase the school's budget for after school programs? If I vote yes, my property tax increases a few dollars each month that will go towards school funding. If I vote no, my property tax stays the same and I'll maintain my budget.

Deuteronomy 30 reminds us that God's people have always been torn between faithfulness and the lure of the wider culture. God has always invites them to turn their hearts back to God and repent from their disobedience.

Moses reminds the people that they must make a choice of which way they will go as they enter into this new reality. Not only that, the next generation has to make the decision of where their future will go either with God or not. It's not “Give me a few hours to think about it”. The current generation had 40 years to think about life and death while they were in the wilderness.

The next generation knows the history of their people being freed from captivity and their disobedience which resulted in them being in the desert instead of making it to the promised land. Will they make a different choice?

Moses tells the people, “Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. For I command you this day to love the Lord your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy.

“But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long, good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.

“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses.”

You would think that it would be easy to choose life, prosperity, and blessings. You’re telling me all I have to do is love God, keep God’s commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways? Yes! I choose life!

What does it mean to ‘choose life’? What type of life are we supposed to be choosing? Walter Bruggemann explains, “That life consists in loving YHWH, which is a practice of holiness... That life consists, moreover, in loving neighbor, which is a practice of justice that grounds and promotes the entitlement of the neighbor, even at cost and inconvenience to self. ‘Love of God’ in holiness and ‘love of neighbor’ in justice constitute a life of relatedness that yields a sense of belonging in community and a gift of material prosperity in the land.” -- Walter Bruggemann (Deuteronomy Commentary, 270) Choose and rechoose life daily because of love for God and love for neighbor.

Let’s go back to music. Songs from various generations tell us what is going on in the world. Songs speak up about social injustices, like police brutality, discrimination, inequality, and oppression. If generations continually speak up about this and express what’s on their mind, what reality they’re living, and what they see, then maybe this is because generations are not telling off the Pharaoh's brutal and oppressive system and have allowed it to take over God’s alternative way of living that brings about life, prosperity, and blessings.

Let’s pause here and sing again. Our songs help us to celebrate God’s values as a community. Would you stand with me again as we sing?

SONG

Choosing and rechoosing is difficult. We become hesitant. We're not sure if the risks are worth it. Maybe we have benefited from the current social, political, and economical policies and we have too much to lose. Racism is still present in society. People of color still experience hate crimes and segregation. We see the lack of access to proper healthcare, food, and education in various communities. What we thought was over with has just been covered up and pushed aside.

But on the other hand, we're not the ones crying out. We're not the ones suffering. Contentment and prosperity has caused us to forget the hardships. Choosing and rechoosing life daily with God puts us in the covenant to love God and love neighbor. Jesus was asked the question, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" We probably ask something similar, "which of Jesus' teachings is the most important?" Jesus answers us, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this. "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:29 NLT)** How do you know if you chose life? This doable act becomes a habit and we develop how we love God with all our heart and with all our mind. This doable act also includes us making a habit of loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Habits are basically a daily practice. How we live out and practice our faith should be noticeable where even future generations want to choose and rechoose life daily out of love for God.

NPR wrote an article titled "2020 Was The Year of Protest Music," describing 2020 as a year of social reckoning and how "artists across styles and genres expressed rage, resolve, mourning, and solidarity." Maybe one day there will be no more songs created that speak about police brutality, inequality, oppression, war, and poverty. There won't be a need to write another "Changes" by Tupac Shakur, another "This is America" by Childish Gambino, or another "Welcome to America" by Lecrae. We won't need another song because we chose life and the next generation chooses life. No longer will there be cries of injustice from violence, greed, oppression, and death. Love, mercy, solidarity, and compassion is shown to individuals, families, communities, nations, the whole world.

At the end of his speech, Moses reiterates his - and God's - desire that God's people would choose to follow God's way of holy justice:

Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live! You can make this choice by loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life. And if you love and obey the Lord, you will live long in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." -- Deuteronomy 30:15-20

“Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster.” How do we choose life over death? Music is an outlet of expression, it inspires, and could help us to think, but it is not a concrete way of addressing life and death realities. Forgetting and dismissing the hardship and wrongs of the past is not how to go forward. Deuteronomy narrates God’s people’s process of exile and coming out of exile. God tells us of how there is hope in the midst of pain, loss, and heartache. We learn from God’s people to acknowledge, speak of it, and learn where God is calling humanity back to him again and again.

What God is calling the people of Israel to, and what God is calling us to is something we’ve read and heard before. God does not want us part of a worldly political and economical life that is harmful to our neighbors. God calls us to an alternative society that is not predatory, it does not function on mass production and consumption. The element of life is based on what the world sees as impossible. God calls us the people of Israel and us to reimagine what it means to be God’s people and what it means for future generations. God reveals how life could look when restoration becomes part of life again.

Deuteronomy 30 is Moses’ appeal to each generation to choose and rechoose life with God. The realization is that God is faithful even if we are not faithful, God is good even if we are not good, God is loving even if we are not loving. God is the one who furthers our hope to make it to the promised land.

Communion + Examen

Where am I aligned with God’s work in the world?

Where am I aligned with values that are anti-Jesus?

How is God inviting me to choose life this week?