

Epiphany 6, Year A

- There's a lesson that my wife Loren and I have learned about having children
- And it's a very simple lesson about offering choices
- We've come to realize that we have to do that – if you leave children an opening, they will absolutely try to exploit it
- I learned this lesson once again just yesterday when rather than presenting him with options, I asked Ezra, our youngest, what he wanted for dinner
- And he thought for just a brief moment and then replied, "I want to make my own tacos"
- So maybe I haven't learned this lesson as well as I ought to have, but still, most of the times we're good about whittling the possible choices down to just two, A or B, and saying to our boys: "These are your options."
- And sometimes this works like a charm: having their choices limited actually helps focus their decision-making
- And sometimes it is simply too great a burden to bear, and one or both of them will reply, possibly tearfully, "those are NOT my options"
- Sometimes, when forced to choose, they prefer to imagine that they can do something totally off the grid – that they can devise an alternative that doesn't fall into the neat binary we've offered them
- I think I know how they feel, when I read this reading from Deuteronomy
- Where Moses proclaims to Israel and to us the word of God:
- "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, 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."
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- When we think about the choices that we face, the choices that our faith places before us, I don't think we often consider them in the terms that God, through Moses, lays out
- We don't want to think of our choices as life-or-death matters – we don't want the stakes to be that high, for one thing – and we convince ourselves that life isn't always so simple –

that choices aren't so black and white

- And far be it from me to say that life is in fact simple, but sometimes, I think, those are actually our options – and no amount of protesting that those are not our options will make it true
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- We do this, of course, because we are so prone to choosing death, and we hate to have it pointed out – it makes us extremely uncomfortable to realize all the many ways we choose death
- That's why you won't find a great many people dwelling too long on the Gospel for today
- Where Jesus talks about all the ways we choose death by holding grudges, refusing to forgive and be reconciled, by allowing ourselves to get angry with each other, by treating each other as objects of lust or items to be discarded rather than beloved children of God
- Look at all the ways, Jesus is telling us, that we choose death instead of life
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- We're every bit as uncomfortable when we hear Jesus say that the things that we hold dear, things like money and status and fame and possessions, that not one of them brings life, not one of them is lasting
- And on this day, the day when we commemorate blessed Absalom Jones – we are uncomfortable if we realize that our own beloved Church chose death for a great many years by not recognizing the gifts that Absalom Jones had for ministry – by not allowing him and other African Americans to be full members of our church and forcing them to start their own congregations, their own denominations
- And to this day we choose death every time we assume that the specter of racism is something that we've conquered, that we no longer need to worry about because we've done such a good job with it, rather than something that we consistently have to fight against and seek to overcome
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- There are an awful lot of ways in which we choose death
- And most of the time, we'd prefer to imagine that our choices aren't quite so easy, aren't quite so stark
- We imagine that the world we live in is nothing but shades of gray
- But more often than not, our choices are much simpler and the stakes are much higher than we make them out to be

- We can continue to choose death, can continue to harm one another and seek only our own benefit, can continue to do that which is not of God – which, it turns out, we have a name for, and that name is sin
- Or we can turn
- Can face back towards God, can love God and God's commandments and do what God asks
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- This is a timely reminder, too: Because in just a week and a half, we'll observe Ash Wednesday, that day when we are reminded of our mortality, of our sinfulness, of our falling short
- I can think of no better reading to bring with us to that holy day than this one
- After all, that's what Ash Wednesday is about, what Lent on the whole is about
- God has set before us a choice
- Life and prosperity
- Death and adversity
- Those are our options