

Sunday, February 13, 2011: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Somewhere along the line, choosing to worship the God met in Jesus became a matter of life and death for me.

by [Edwin Searcy](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

Although I was raised in a preacher's household and have been a preacher myself for three decades, my own conversion happened gradually. I didn't even realize what I was going through until one of my parishioners told me that the congregation had been watching my conversion one Sunday, one sermon at a time.

There was a time when preaching Moses' invitation to "choose life so that you and your descendants may live" seemed straightforward to me. The life-giving choices conveniently lined up with my political and theological leanings. But somewhere along the line, choosing to worship the God met in Jesus became a matter of life and death for me. Youthful certitude gave way to doubt in Moses' assurance that "this commandment . . . is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away" (Deut. 30:11). Choosing life in a messy world turned out to be much harder than Moses had promised, so I danced around this text whenever it showed up on the calendar. The congregation did not seem to notice. But I did. The text haunted me.

The pulpit that I inhabit on Sunday morning has the Hebrew lettering "etz hayim" inscribed on it from right to left. Tree of life. Those who gather on Sunday morning also see, over my shoulder, a large wooden cross. Tree of death. The upside-down logic of the gospel is in the face of the congregation every time it gathers. Tree of life. Tree of death. Which is which? We come from a world in which choosing the good life looks like securing the bottom line, building up a good portfolio, bolting the door against trouble and playing your part as a consumer. On Sunday we enter a world in which trying to save our lives leads to the loss of everything. In this peculiar world dying for Jesus' sake turns out to be the portal to a life that is richly blessed.

When it comes to pointing the way to this cruciform life I feel overwhelmed by my incompetence. In what ways have I died to the temptations of consumption and of securing my future when faced with my neighbor's poverty and ache? Then I think of my congregation and the lessons I've learned from its story of loss. Twenty-five years ago University Hill Congregation in Vancouver could not sustain its life in the building that it had constructed in the halcyon days of the baby boom. The church sold the building and property and rented a chapel for Sunday mornings. There was no space for midweek programming, no building to call "our church." The congregation's identity as a place in the neighborhood died.

Of course the people mourned and still mourn their loss, but at some point the congregation let go of the anxiety of losing its building and its promise of security. The congregation was under no illusions. Its future was and is tenuous. But on the other side of this death, the congregation chose life. In the face of this uncertainty the congregation discovered that worship is its beating heart. Now it hangs on the words of scripture, rediscovering week by week what it is to live by the word.

Keeping a congregation alive on Canada's west coast (the most secular region of North America) is hard. Churches here die with alarming regularity. Few are born. In a culture that shapes us to believe that we never have enough, it is a massive leap of faith to trust that "the Lord is our shepherd, we don't need anything else." Learning to trust God with our future rather than to take charge ourselves is a risky choice.

I am not sure when or how it happened, but somewhere along the line going to church on Sunday became more like attending a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous than, well, going to church. Sometimes it feels as if we're attending a 12-step meeting. Every time we gather we choose to live by dying to our former way of life. Every time we die again to the belief that the church is entitled to a prominent place in the neighborhood. We learn to choose a life of loving God and trusting in the Good Shepherd week by week, even though we cannot know what tomorrow will bring. Old habits die hard. As it is in AA, so it is in congregational recovery. The journey to trusting in God's power to save us is filled with setbacks. But there is something wonderful about living on the other side of denial. We have given up trusting in our own capacity and are working the steps to recovering faith in the God who heals and redeems.

It is not only the congregation that is in recovery. At every gathering there are women and men seeking sobriety from the addiction to have and to consume and to control the outcome of life. I count myself among them. For us the church is no longer a location; it is a movement. We are discovering others who have also heard Christ's call to die to the harmful patterns, mistaken assumptions and idolatrous beliefs that we have called "good" and "life." We share a common struggle to choose a life of obedience to God's way of neighbor love.

Moses was right: "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut. 30:14). We have been singing, preaching and teaching that it is "in God we trust." It turns out that if we trust the word to be true, we will have choose to die in order to live.