

Releasing our grip (Sirach 15:15-20; Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

So often we are trapped by our own imaginations.

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"It's the old Burmese monkey trap," my friend told me.

He was referring to what Robert Pirsig, in his philosophical novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, calls the old South Indian monkey trap. Picture a coconut chained to a stake. There's a bit of rice inside that can be grabbed through a small hole, which fits the monkey's hand exactly. But when the monkey makes a fist to grab the food and run, he can't get his hand back out.

"You're only caught in the trap," my friend said, "because you won't release your grip. But is that little scrap of food you're holding onto really worth being stuck?"

The image haunted me. I thought of C.S. Lewis's observation that the gates of hell are locked from the inside; leaving is as simple as throwing the latch.

I'm not preaching a prosperity Gospel. Not every circumstance is of our own choosing. But after that conversation I began to wonder if what I was holding onto was life-giving or death-dealing. It was a new year, and I noticed people were choosing words to guide their annual intentions, rather than making resolutions. I chose the word *release*. I often wrote it on the inside of my wrist, a reminder to unclench my fist.

I began to question what was really in the coconut. I started to release my grip on some false notions that had kept me trapped for years.

This week's Old Testament readings present us with choices. Life and death. Prosperity and adversity. Fire and water. Surely nobody chooses the fire.

Reading them I thought again of the rice in the coconut. I thought of how rarely I have broken bad with real intention. More often I have chosen what I believe, in the moment, is life. I have had a false notion, like the monkey does, that I must hold onto what in reality was only a scrap. I have believed that my existence depends upon having the ball of rice, when it was not the nourishment I needed.

At times what I insisted on having would have been my own death sentence. "Whichever one he chooses he will be given," the scripture says.

So often we are trapped by our own imaginations. We have the wrong idea. Our limited understanding and deeply held assumptions lock the door from the inside. I am learning to accept the limits of what I desire and even what my imagination can apprehend, to hold what I want loosely, and even to let it go.