

And we're off and running! A new school year has started at First Lutheran School, as it's also started for a lot of the college students in our congregation. GSL gets it's turn for the first day of school this Tuesday.

September marks the start of a brand-new year of Christian Education for all ages here at First Lutheran Church! Next Sunday, is the Sunday School Carnival. And after that it will be great to see **all** the kids of the congregation and school back and learning more about God's love for them, growing in their faith in Christ, and having fun along the way, through Sunday school, Catechism classes, youth groups, and so much more. For us adults, we have a new slate of Bible study opportunities too, as we enter the Fall season. I encourage you to read all about it in the September newsletter.

And speaking of Fall, the shorter days are sure signs that fall is officially just around the corner. Soon, the temperatures will start getting cooler and it will be time for many families to take part in those enjoyable fall time activities like going to the apple orchards, pumpkin patches, and cornfield mazes. Have you ever ventured into one of those mazes? I have vivid memories of going with our kids when they were little: The tall corn stalks are all around you, as you make your way forth through the maze, so **many** paths to choose from, only one is the right way out. As you walk along trying different paths, you hear the crunch and crackle of the newly fallen leaves and dried up corn husks beneath your feet. You feel the cool breeze in the air and see the autumn sun peeking through the clouds. You continue making your way through the twists and turns of corn rows, trying to make the right decisions that will lead you out. Then the realization sets in that you've been stuck in this maze for a really long time and it's getting more and more frustrating **and** tiring as time goes by! You'd really rather be sitting at home with your feet up and sipping a nice cup of apple cider.

Now imagine wandering around not for forty minutes in a corn maze on a cool day but for forty years in a hot desert wilderness. That was basically the situation of the Israelites as we pick up with today's Old Testament lesson. As a nation they had been left to wander for four decades without a permanent home. That was their punishment for rebelling against God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and had always lovingly provided so much for them. Now, at long last, with all that behind them, they were getting ready to make their way out of the Sinai desert into the lush, beautiful Promised Land of Canaan.

Now almost at the very end of their journey, the Israelites had come to a crossroads, and it was time for them to make a **big** and very consequential decision: Would they remain faithful to God and receive life and His blessings in the new land, or would they turn away from God and suffer death and God's condemnation? Time would tell.

This morning we too, like the Israelites, stand at a crossroads. It's not a crossroads at the threshold of the Promised Land, and it's not a fork in the road in a corn maze, either. We stand at the crossroads of a new year of Christian education for all ages here at First Lutheran Church and School. Will **we**, as God's people remain faithful to God, or will we turn and go our own way? The decision, I hope, is an easy one.

Although we're not at the edge of entering the Promised Land like the Israelites, these verses from God's Word still apply to us as they reflect a larger theme found throughout the Bible: God offers His people of every time and every place the choice of following His way of life or following the way of death. Let's take some time to examine these two paths.

"See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil." (15) So our text begins and so the two roads are laid out. Now the choice must be made. The first choice is the way of life. It is a call to a life of faith. God is calling us to continue to trust Him Who first brought us to **life**, not only to physical life, but to **spiritual** life.

Galatians chapter 3:28-29 tells us **where** that spiritual life began for us, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." So we, too, are God's children, just like the Israelites of old. We have been brought to life through our Baptism into Christ (as we saw God do for little Lilly this morning). Because of God's gifts given there, we have faith in God and **spiritual** life. We believe that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins and rose again to give us new life; new life which is delivered to us through God's Word and sacraments- Baptism and Communion. Now God is calling for us too, like He did the Israelites, to remain faithful to Him and choose His path which will bring us life.

In verse 16 Moses continues: "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it." In other words,

remain in God's Word and you will enjoy life to the fullest. Our Lord promises to guide us and bless us. It's clear that for the Israelites, the people already called by God to be His own dear children, the benefits of staying faithful to God by obeying His Word were very beneficial. God promised them that they would live and prosper in the land they were getting ready to enter and claim as their own.

For us Christians today, who are God's children through faith in His Son Jesus, the blessings and benefits of remaining faithful to God and His Word are tremendous. In Matthew 7 (v.33) our Lord Jesus promises, "Seek first (the kingdom of God) and His righteousness, and all these things", that is, everything we need in life, "will be given to you as well." One more verse that describes God's way of life, and this is really amazing to think about is 1 Corinthians 2:9, "No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him." Trusting God, following Him as He leads us down His path of life we will not only have the indescribably beautiful future blessings of heaven, but He will also provide us with everything we need right now on earth.

God **will** take care of you. He will give you your daily bread, which means **everything** that has to do with your physical life. 'The Lord is your shepherd, you shall lack **nothing**.' This is what life looks like when we love God and walk in His ways. Our highest concern is to keep **His** commands. We trust Him for life, and He comes through with **eternal** life- which we'll know in its fullness at the resurrection on the Last Day. Who would want to reject the way of life? Who would want to choose the other path, the way of death? Moses describes this path, also, in our text.

Picking up at verse 17: "But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess." Sadly, as time would tell, many of the Israelites did not remain faithful to God. The history books of the Old Testament are filled with many grim examples of them turning to the worship of false gods. The end result was death and destruction. But a few in Israel did remain faithful to God. And so what we can learn from this text is that God never forces His love on anyone. The path of death is always an option for all who insist on rejecting His love.

And that's what people do when they put anything in life above God and continue to make that thing more important. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther said it well, "**Anything** to which your heart relies and depends, I say,

that is really your God.” - (LC 1.3) Whatever becomes more important to you than God, whether it’s money, a car, a job, the pursuit of leisure, even your family, when any of these is something you devote your time and love for in place of God becomes its own false god Following down this path is following in the way of death. It can only lead us wanting more and never getting enough until finally all that’s left is emptiness, death, and eternal separation from God. This is what life looks like when one does not love God above all else.

The choice of following the way of life or instead taking the way of death is actually before us every day. Will we honor our parents, or do and say things to *dishonor* them? Will we help our neighbor in their time of need or will wish harm upon them if we don’t like them? Will we be honest with other people’s property, or will we scheme to get it for ourselves? Will we explain everything in the kindest way about our neighbor or will we listen to gossip, and spread gossip, about them? The choices are ours. If we follow the way of death long enough and unrepentantly, the outcome is not good.

So there they are: The Way of Life and the Way of Death. We’re at the crossroads. Everyday. But particularly now as we look to the future and the future of God’s church in this place. Our text concludes with these words of challenge to make the right choice. Moses said: “(T)oday...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and *holding fast* to him, for he is your life and length of days....”

Today at this crossroads, God calls on us to *choose life*. He has already chosen us in Christ to be His children. He has brought us to faith. Now He calls for us to be faithful and follow His path of life and reject the path of death. It’s very clear that for anyone who cares about life, the way of death really is not an option. The most important choice is that God chose us to be His own in Baptism. His own Son, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, walked the road of death to bring about our adoption as God’s children. Now, staying close to our risen Savior as He comes to you in His Word, you can indeed hold fast to God because He has given you everything.

This month, as we begin a new year of Christian education, all of us can renew the commitment our parents, sponsors, and fellow believers made for us at our baptism. We can commit to serving the Lord and following His path of life our whole life long.

God Himself will give you the strength to remain faithful to Him as you live out your life under His blessing and care. Every time you hear and read

God's Word, the Holy Spirit will help you to choose and to **keep** choosing the path of life. Amen.