

Out of the Ordinary
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Startups are always challenging, sometimes white-knuckle, affairs, as some of you know by experience. They involve a lot of planning; you want everything to go right. A little over a week ago, five of us attended the startup of the new North American Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio – the same city in which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was formed 23 years before. It was an exciting time, an inspiring time. It was also a meeting with its share of snafus, as many new things often are. Microphones that didn't work, PowerPoint people who were perhaps new to the task, and even one moment when the new bishop turned to an aid in the midst of a complicated parliamentary exchange and, not quite out of microphone range, asked, "Now just what are we voting on?" That time the microphone *did* work – perhaps a little too well.

Startups are important. You want to get things right and it's important that a lot of new folks get on board and know what's expected of them.

Both our first lesson and our Gospel lesson show signs of being startup documents – the startup of a new nation called Israel, under the law-giving leadership of Moses, and the startup soon to be known as the Church, under Jesus who is himself God-in-the-flesh. In both cases, there is an intensity, a deliberation, a concern that everyone present know and understand their roles. We of a more settled time – or perhaps just a less spiritually focused and intentional age – may find some of the words we heard a bit unsettling. Yet, although today we are beyond the startup stage, those things which were at stake at the times of Moses and Jesus are still live issues for you and for me today.

Thus, what we have before us today is a Word which is No Ordinary Word; a Man who is No ordinary Man; and the offer of a Life which is No Ordinary Life.

First, that word which is **no ordinary word**. I remember the first time I saw the movie, *The Ten Commandments* – Cecil B. DeMille’s great epic of the 1950s. I was nine years old when it came out, and seeing it was a formative experience. The slave who was crushed as the massive stones were being moved, and the snaky fingers of death that crawled through the skies on the fateful night the angel of death passed through Egypt – ahh, those were never to be forgotten images for me. Never mind that those things aren’t in the Bible, they were doggone impressive. God was one guy I decided I really didn’t want to cross.

And our first lesson, at first, seems to fit into that kind of a mold. The book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible, comes to us as a grand sermon of Moses – his last words to the people before he dies. And our lesson begins with him saying, “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.” And it goes on to threaten:

if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land

That seems pretty harsh. But, again, this is a startup – the very beginnings of a people called Israel whom God has created to bring his intentions for the world into play. It was an important moment – think of the giving of the law on Mt Sinai as God’s IPO – and it was critical that the people were on board from the get go. This is entry-level Judaism. This is God speaking a word to a group of uneducated former slaves with no scripture and no tradition. So how do you launch something like that? How do you say things so that they will be understood not only by the immediate hearers but also by the generations who would follow?

God did it by giving them a word – no ordinary word, but *his* word – in a template that they would recognize. Template? Were they into templates back in those days? Absolutely. And one template they all knew right away was the treaty covenant template used by powerful nations when they subdued weaker ones. It was a heavy duty, top down affair, written by the victor, and not at all what you would call user friendly, but it did put the cookie on the lowest shelf, so to speak.

People knew what it was when they heard its language. And so it is, in Deuteronomy, that God put his word in a form that people way back then would immediately recognize as a top down, heavy duty treaty covenant, complete with the expected blessings and curses found at the end.

That's the shape of Deuteronomy. Yet there was more in this case. This word from God, familiar in its shape to those who heard it, was at the same time no ordinary word. That's because, unlike the treaty covenants of Moses' day, written purely in the interest of the conquering nation, this *extraordinary* word from God was given in the interest of his people – for *their* sake not his – and, ultimately, for your sake and for mine.

It takes a bit of reading to get by the heavy template of blessings and curses to hear what really lies at the center: God's call to choose life. A lot of options now lay before this new people – some of them good, many of them bad – perhaps not unlike us today. God wanted desperately for his people to choose that which was good – for their sake as well as for the sake of the world, since God's plan was eventually to enter and encounter the world through them. And that's a call that still comes to you and to me out of this ancient book – this word that is no ordinary word: the call to choose life!

Now, the last verses of our text begin with an unfortunate translation: “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses *against* you.” Without going into gruesome detail on the Hebrew, that could be better translated as “witnesses among you” or “witnesses in your midst.” Thus,

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses among you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

That plea to choose life, coming at the very beginning of their history together as God's people, is very much like the cry that came again at the end, from the prophet Ezekiel speaking to exiles in a far off land:

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live. (*Ezek 18:31-32*)

That's the nature of the God who has called you today to this place – the God whom we worship. In spite of some of the entry level, startup language we find before us, when we listen closely to this out of the ordinary word, we encounter God's strong desire that we know life, real life.

The word that God gives us is no ordinary word because, when all is said and done – when Israel's chapters are all played out and the Old Testament comes to its close – this extraordinary word points ahead to a man who would be **no ordinary man**. No ordinary man. Our Gospel lesson brings us our other startup text, a text in which Jesus – God in our midst – is working on building up his core leadership: his disciples. Again, the language may seem a bit over the top to us:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.

So what's *that* all about? A bit of overstatement to make clear the priorities of a disciple, yes. Yet three times in this text Jesus tells not how we *can* be his disciple but rather how we *cannot*. Now we know Jesus – no ordinary man – is not out to exclude. In the verses right before our Gospel lesson, he tells the parable of the marriage feast where the master says to his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.” And right after our Gospel lesson Jesus tells of the shepherd with 100 sheep leaving the 99 to go search for the lost one, and of the women with 10 coins who scours the house to find the one that was missing. Clearly, Jesus' great desire is that all come to know and follow him – and to know life, as we heard in our first lesson. No ordinary man, Jesus is God in the flesh who says in John 10 that he came so that you “may have life, and have it to the full.”

That's why Jesus then seeks disciples. Disciple means “learner,” or “student.” *All* are called to follow; *some* are then called to be disciples, called to be a part of the inner circle, the ones who will carry the freight

when Jesus has returned to be with the Father. And for disciples, that sometimes involves giving things up, or “cross bearing” as Jesus describes it.

But know this, my friend: your place and standing before God – your being made whole and forgiven and a child of God – these things don’t depend upon leaving your family or carrying crosses. They depend upon one thing and one thing only: they depend upon what Jesus did on the cross for you, and your trusting in and being gripped by that one thing.

However, know also this: there is then extended to you and me the possibility of also being a disciple. It’s not a requirement; it’s not demanded of you; but it’s a privilege and opportunity extended to you. And if you take it up – if you say, “Lord, I want to be a part of what you are doing here; I want to be a part of your bringing wholeness and change to the lives around me” – you will soon discover not only that Jesus is no ordinary man but that in following this son of the living God as a disciple, you are introduced to a life that is **no ordinary life**.

No ordinary life. What is this thing called life really all about, anyway? Maybe you approach it as a competition; that is, when the game is over, the one with the most toys wins. Yet in spite of our love affair with the toys – especially the iToys, but also the carToys, the houseToys, and the vacationToys – deep down inside you and I really know that just having acquired a pile of toys by the time the game ends doesn’t really cut it.

Jesus calls you to discipleship not merely to staff his startup, so to speak, but because it’s in living as his disciple that you will really find the most that life has to offer. “Choose life!” God pleads through Moses in our first lesson. And Jesus says he came that you “may have life, and have it to the full.”

When the game is over, the one with the most toys wins? Not hardly. Rather, “when the game is over, it all goes back in the box.” That, by the way, is the thought-provoking title of a class we’re going to be

offering later this Fall: “When the game is over, it all goes back in the box.” Let me close by telling you about two friends who, by reading a word that is no ordinary word encountered a man who is no ordinary man and came to know a life which is no ordinary life.

The first is Wes Neal. When I was in high school, our congregation got its first intern. Interns are young men and women between their second and third years of seminary who spend a year getting real life experience in a church before their final year of preparation to be a pastor. They are usually really wonderful people, a bit wet behind the ears, who often show signs of having recently spent too many hours in libraries and not enough out in the sun. That was our low level of expectation in the youth group when we heard that an intern named Wesley was coming to lead us the following year – and so we were absolutely not prepared for the arrival of Wes Neal, an exuberant body builder and weight lifter who drove a shiny red Corvette – the kind with the white scoop in the side – and had connections with people in Hollywood. Unbelievable.

Wes was an enthusiastic Christian who was with us for just a year, but it was a galvanizing year in which God used him to open our eyes to the Gospel and the possibilities of what God can do in young lives. He ended up joining the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ, was on their weight lifting team, and started a group called Athletes in Action. Over the years, I lost track of Wes, but ten days ago, while we were in Columbus, Ohio, we tracked him down. I recognized him in an instant – the same dynamism, the same light-up-the-room smile. But there were also the crutches.

A couple of you St Tim’s members are former weight lifters and have told me about discovering the hard way how bad weight lifting can be for the body. Twenty-year-olds think they’re indestructible and all that. But what struck me about Wes and his crutches was the complete lack of feeling sorry for himself. No time for that. He’s still a disciple, still a Bible teacher and conference speaker, still enthusiastically writing Christian books on athletics and coaching – and Judy and I came away

from that meeting energized, with the same sense of challenge and enthusiasm that I remember from 45 years ago. No ordinary life.

The other life I want to mention has to do with when the game is over. When things all go back in the box. This other life is really two lives, Beth and Eric. I've mentioned them before – a young couple in their 40s with a 9-year old daughter. Again strong disciples of Jesus, they were with us for a few years in Tanzania. Beth is now head of the Biblical department at a Lutheran college. Eric is from Cupertino and a couple of years ago was struck by brain cancer. It has been a courageous struggle, with Beth leading the way much of the time. Eric, a wonderful husband and father and a good friend, finally entered the church triumphant last week and his memorial service will be tomorrow.

When the game is over, it all goes back into the box. But when “the game” – life – is played as a disciple, it makes all the difference in the world. Beth and Eric visited us just a few weeks ago on a final trip down to California and Eric's home. It was clear that the end was near; but it was also clear that they were both solidly in God's grip and he was bringing them through. And now he has done that for Eric – and continues to hold Beth and her daughter. No ordinary lives, but rather lives caught up in the hands of God who gave us life in the first place.

And that, again, is what we were called to in our first lesson where Moses pleads:

choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.

Choose life – real life. God comes to you with a word that is no ordinary word, to tell you of his entering our world as no ordinary man, so that you can now live a life that is no ordinary life. Amen