This time last week I was in Puerto Rico. I most unfortunately drew the short straw to accompany Heather on a scouting trip for our next mission partnership. It was a breezy, sunny, beautiful 80 degree day. I could see the ocean from my hotel window. That is not the case here today which is fine, I’m not at all bitter about it. While in Puerto Rico, Heather and I met with different mission partners who are doing good and needed work in the wake of Hurricane Maria. We had the privilege of sitting down with the pastor of the first Baptist church in Puerto Rico. The Spanish American War ended in 1898 and the church was founded in 1899. We asked Pastor Laura to tell us about her church, and she told us that when she arrived six years ago, the church was dying. They had turned so far inward, concerned with maintaining tradition and the sacred places of their building, that they had forgotten that the people outside the walls of the church mattered. They had forgotten that the young people who kept leaving the church, who they themselves had raised in the church, mattered. They were dying and they didn’t even realize it. The decision had been set before them: life or death, and they unknowingly continued to choose death each time they chose tradition and maintaining the way things had always been over people.

The Israelites had a decision set before them as well: life or death. The book of Deuteronomy is in a way Moses’ last hurrah, He says everything he has to say that the people of Israel need to know before he dies and Joshua assumes his role as leader of Israel. Our passage today comes at the conclusion of Moses’ recounting God’s oath with Israel—that they will live and prosper in the land promised to them. Our verses leave them with a pretty big decision to make. Do they accept the covenant and choose the way of life and of God? Or do they reject the covenant and choose the way of death turning against their God?
Love the Lord your God, walk in God’s ways, and observe God’s commandments, decrees, and ordinances and you shall live, Moses says. But if you turn away from these, if you don't hear these words, and turn to other gods, you're not going to make it. You may find yourself wondering, well what exactly are they signing on for by choosing life? What are “God’s ways,” what commandments are they to observe? Moses doesn’t exactly lay it out for them here, but that’s because he’s spent the entire book laying it out for them. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your strength.”

They knew what it meant to follow in God’s ways, to love God, and to love and care for one another. They also knew that they must do these things because their lives depended on one another. They didn’t make it out of Egypt by only caring for themselves, they did it together, as a people. In order to pack up your entire life on a dime without even having time for the bread to rise for dinner, to up and leave in the middle of the night, to literally have death pass over you, and flee an oppressive regime that has enslaved you for 400 years, you have to really depend on one another and have a lot of trust in God.

God had made a covenant with them promising never to abandon them, promising them land, freedom, and prosperity. Even though they had this promise of life, they still had a ways to go before they got there. They had not yet reached the promise land, God had promised they would—but what would they have to go through before they got there?

The invitation is to choose life—a good one, not an easy one. Whenever a baby is dedicated into our church, George walks the child around the Sanctuary so that every person in the pews can see her or him and so the child can in turn see every person in the pews. The church and the child’s family choose life and life together. The parents choose to raise the child in the church, and the church promises to help care for and love their child. Before the dedication ends, George says to the child that we hope she or he has a good life, not an easy life.

Life doesn’t have to be easy to be good; in fact, I would say that if life is good it can’t be easy. It’s not always easy to be in
community together, there is conflict and miscommunication. Sometimes in community it's easy to forget that we belong to one another and we forget that our words and actions matter. It's easy to forget that each person in our community both within our walls here at Wilshire and outside our walls matters and is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. It can be easy to not observe God's commandments—to not walk in the ways of love, justice, kindness and mercy. These are the ways of death. These are the ways of death that kill us individually and corporately. The ways of death are easy to fall into; it starts small and before we know it we're not living at all. We become so closed off, death creeps in, the good is gone and it was all so easy.

To make the good choice, to choose life, means life for the entire community not just for a select few because our lives depend on one another. Choosing life means a home not just for "God's people" but for the immigrant and the stranger as well (who are also God's people). Choosing life means economic policies that leave enough for everyone. Choosing life means an equitable distribution of resources for all. God desires life for us, so choose life. Use your voice, your position, your power and choose life—not just for yourself but for the entire community.

Fear not friends, because it's never too late. It is never too late to choose what is good over what is easy. It's never too late to choose what is right over what is wrong. God is not tied to a mandatory death sentence for those who choose death over life. It's never too late to choose life over death.

I've always found the final scene between Harry Potter and Voldemort in J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* quite profound. The majority of this final book is spent with Harry and his friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley hunting horcruxes. Lord Voldemort made seven horcruxes in order to live forever. A horcrux is made by killing another person, which causes the soul to fracture. The horcrux allows the person to live for as long as it exists. Except what they're doing is not really living, because they have split their soul and have become shells of who they once were.
After Harry, Hermione and Ron have found and destroyed all seven horcruxes, they are finally able to destroy Voldemort. Harry, however, does not immediately jump at the chance to kill Voldemort. In their final showdown, Harry urges Voldemort who he calls by his real name, Tom Riddle, to try for some remorse. The only way for a person who has split their soul and created a horcrux to put their soul back together is to show genuine remorse for what they have done. It is an incredibly painful process to put the soul back together and it most certainly isn’t easy but it is the right thing to do—to turn from the ways of death and to turn back to life, true life, not the fragmented life they have created for themselves.

Unsurprisingly, Voldemort scoffs at Harry and rejects this notion of remorse, to show genuine sorrow and repent from all of the pain, suffering and death he has caused. He raises his wand to finish Harry off once and for all, shouting the killing curse, while Harry chooses to disarm. As Voldemort screams, “avada kedavra,” Harry yells, “expelliarmus,” which is the spell used to disarm an opponent, causing their wand to fly out of their hand into your own. In the end, Harry Potter chose the way of life, he chose to do things in community, to rely on others. He knew it was never too late to choose life and he chose to urge Voldemort to change his ways; he chose to disarm instead of attack.

It’s never too late to choose life over death. You would think that for Pastor Laura’s church, Hurricane Maria would make them completely incapable of choosing life. In 2017, Hurricane Maria brought utter destruction and death to the island of Puerto Rico, affecting 37,000 people. Pastor Laura had only been at her church for a couple years when the hurricane hit and it was finally time for her church to jump into action—to choose life in the face of death. The church became the epicenter for disaster volunteers. They housed and fed over a hundred Red Cross volunteers and they fed people from the community who were pitching in to help anyway they could.

They could no longer ignore the people outside their walls. They welcomed groups from all over who came to help with disaster relief. One large group from North Carolina who were
specifically equipped for disaster response came and continued to send people over for months and years to put roofs on houses (at this point they’ve done over 350). When the time came for them to stop sending teams over as frequently, Pastor Laura said to them, “You need to train us to do this work. Once you leave, we’ll have no idea how to put on roofs or how to put together and install water filtration systems. Teach us.” So they did, and the church came to the training and learned. Now they still have occasional visits from the North Carolina group but they are putting on roofs and installing water filtration systems themselves.

The church’s willingness to jump in to help their community has changed a lot of things about the church. They’ve had people from the community come and join their church because they are the church who helps people. They used to keep children separate from the adults during worship, because they were “disruptive,” they would wiggle, talk, and get up to go to the bathroom too many times. Now, Pastor Laura has been able to bring the children into worship—and not just for them to be seen, but to be active participants. The children bring incredible life and ministry to their worship. When it comes time to greet people, they are the first ones up and rush to greet everyone. When people stand for prayer, the children are once again often the first people to go to that person, take their hand, and pray for them.

In 2018, another hurricane tore through the Caribbean and essentially leveled the Bahamas. It was easy for Pastor Laura and her church to see that Hurricane Dorian had left the people of the Bahamas in the same position as Hurricane Maria had left them in Puerto Rico. So, the church has now gone to the Bahamas twice and plans to continue to go and help them clean up and rebuild. Even though Puerto Rico is far from recovered, the church knows that the life of the people in the Bahamas matters just as much as their own and that the people in the Bahamas are just as much their people as the people of Puerto Rico are, and they want to help them in any way they can. Pastor Laura’s church chose life when death literally blew down their doors, and they continue to choose life day in and day out.
One of the beautiful things about our passage today is that we don’t immediately know what the Israelites chose. We’re left hanging a bit, but that invites us into the decision. The same choice that was presented to the people of Israel is presented to us, the people of Wilshire.

Friends, we have set before us today life and death. God wishes life for us and invites us into life, loving God and walking in God’s way. The good news is it’s never too late. We can always choose the way of life and the way of God.

Choose life. Choose life and forgive one another both because you have been forgiven and because you'll be in need of forgiveness someday too. Choose life and extend compassion and kindness even if it’s not extended to you. Choose life and speak up for all of God’s people, not just a select few. Use your privilege and power to stand for justice, even if the world around you demands complacency. Choose life wherever, however, whoever you are. Choose life today, so that we all may live.