

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

“Choice” – we hear that word a lot these days. People are called upon to make a choice like never before, on everything from which Baskin & Robbins’ gazillion ice-cream flavors to put on their cone, to which of the umpty-hundred Cable TV Channels or the zillion-bazillion Music Audio Channels available from the Cloud. In our cars, the GPS Robot Lady tells us where to turn and which street or highway to choose, and we have choices FROM her, and choices to NOT chose her choice (and suffer the consequences). We even have a choice on which voice the Robot Lady should use to give us choices – you can special order other voices: (Arnold S. voice: “Hey, weak boy – ternnn right heahh, if you want to ah-rivvvvve theahhh...)

I’m retired. When the sun peaks through my window in the morning, I mutter, “my body, my choice.” Usually, the body wants to sleep in, and I tell the sun to get lost. However, when I was working, my body’s choice got over-ruled by my employer’s choice.

So, what is it about choices that makes our species – the brotherhood (and sisterhood) of Humanity unique among God’s creation?

Animals have choices to make, but they make them from a very different platform than do we. Animals have instincts. These are the innate urgings that God placed within them to help them survive, each one’s specific instincts tailored to their specific needs and abilities.

An animal’s instincts can be modified or affected by other factors – it’s drive to eat, to rest, to procreate, to follow the pack or the taught behaviors of its master – but, in the end, they are still choices limited to basic responses. An animal does not have morals, the ability to weigh the virtues or vices connected with choosing or not choosing a given response.

A dog, seeing a piece of cake left within reach in an empty room, will not hold its chin with its paw and think “Should I take the cake? Although I can, would it be more righteous to leave the cake so that others may eat it? Plus, I do not own this cake. While true that it is just a piece, and there is probably more cake elsewhere, is it still within the spirit of righteousness that I help myself? To eat, or not to eat, that is the question.”

No. If we could put it into words, an animal’s response to the temptation of cake might go like this (Dug the Dog’s voice) “Cake! Eat the cake! Wait. My master would be angry because he is angry when I eat the cake. But I want to eat the cake. My nose says, ‘eat the cake’. There is no alpha dog to take the cake. There is no master here to get angry if I eat the cake. Point! EAT THE CAKE!”

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

And the cake would be eaten – no morality involved.

We humans are created in a much more complex way than that. We also have basic instincts – the drive to eat, to procreate, to rest, to survive – but above these, we also have a conscience. We have a yearning to not only survive and to thrive in the environment into which we find ourselves placed, but to UNDERSTAND it. Although consciences can be corrupted and (over time) seared and disabled, for most of us, we have a yearning to know that life makes sense, that it was put together by some sort of vast intelligence that explains its amazing complexity and beauty and order. We want to know that this intelligence that created all things is still active in running the universe, even with its disconcerting fallenness and brokenness – and many of us long to meet or merge with this Higher Power, somehow, in the future ... and to please it and come into conformity with its wishes and universal plan somehow in the present life.

We alone have the knowledge of God. We alone have the desire to find Him, to be loved by Him, and to have assurance that death is not the end of everything – that we have a future with Him after that fateful ending.

Even when belief systems deny the personality or existence of that God, we still seek to fill our God-longings with God substitutes and desires to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Atheistic scientists still see the order in things – indeed, science (the art of studying what can be seen and from those observations and testing’s of what can be seen, making conclusions regarding what we cannot see) – science is DEPENDENT on a universe that works with order, even as they explain it away as a random process (an apple seed planted always grows into some sort of apple tree, it never grows into a pine tree or a bear or an ’51 Chevrolet). Those who reject the known God of the Bible humorously refer to a “God” who runs the created order – “Mother Nature” – and, while this is done in jest, She serves to put a face on the fact that there is order in all of creation, and the sun will come up today pretty much where and when we expect it to, just as it did the day before and the day before that.

Mother Nature is, thus, a “God Stand-In”, a place-filler for the absence of Jehovah or some other existing God, but minus the morals and demands of the same, fulfilling the need to explain order in chaos but without extending any demands beyond those of Her human creators: to recycle your soda cans, not drill too many oil wells, resist those who pollute too much or resist “Climate Change” legislation or whatever.

There are many other “God Stand-Ins”, personified or otherwise that people will use who reject the implications of a personal Creator God with the inherent threat of – should He want to communicate with His created beings – the reality that such a superior Being who could have created such a thing as

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

this vast universe might also have some requirements and expectations to dictate to his creatures after going to all the trouble to develop them and the world in which they were designed to operate.

(A man who spends great time, money, and effort in restoring a classic Corvette obviously has some plans for what the car will be doing once its restoration is complete. The car had better not expect to inform its maker that it doesn't plan to go to Road America, that it would rather drive over and sit in the park or hang out by the lake, and he is not invited and had better keep his distance if he knows what is good for him!)

Man (Humankind) is the only species with a conscience – an awareness that some things are innately “right” and others “wrong,” above what his own instincts or desires may indicate. Humankind is the only species with a sense of eternity, of destiny beyond merely surviving through life and that's all, of a sense of calling and of morality. Humans are the sole species that feature the sense of an eternal Creator above and beyond themselves and their universe (attempts to ascribe this to animals or plants is an exercise in anthropomorphism). Only men and women, boys and girls, have the sense of being able to communicate with their Creator, and an awareness that they may bear some responsibility to learn of same and owe some return on the reality of their existence.

Whether they believe in Jehovah, or some other personal “god” ... or not.

Too often, men and women reject the reality of a God to whom they owe some sort of obedience as too confining for their tastes and choices. A person's sense of responsibility – their conscience – can be dulled down to the point it is no longer felt at all – the “I don't care about those things; I just care about what needs to happen right now” attitude. The saying, “Desperate times call for desperate measures” – while little more than a slogan – what does it mean but that the speaker is endowing himself with God-like rights to decide right from wrong regardless of whatever anyone else thinks – it really is a battle cry to refuse to take responsibility for one's actions from any higher power. “If I don't believe in it, it doesn't exist for me” is another way to word this attitude.

But even in a universe without a personal God behind it, there still are absolute truths that are unaffected by our willingness to believe in them, or not. (Just try jumping off a ten-story building after saying “if I don't believe in gravity, it doesn't apply to me” and see how that ends for you!) We can teach kids in our schools that there is no such thing as gravity, we can call any who believe, “gravityphobes” or something like that and purge them from our society, we can legislate gravity out of existence by the rule of law – fining and imprisoning any who dare to name its name. We can have scientists and Hollywood celebrities teach us that gravity has ceased to exist, and we no longer need worry about it. We can make movies where people defy gravity and are proven to be true and wise.

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

But, even then, if we step off a ten-story building with no protection, it is not going to end well for us. Because gravity is an absolute reality. It does not change, even if we change what we teach and require over it.

Human pride often is one of the biggest roadblocks to refusing to acknowledge and embrace absolute truth when we fear or resent its potential requirements of us. Even the Bible states that, in the world, there are “many gods and many lords,” (REFERENCE) and it is considered arrogant and offensive to lift one god above the others and imply that one is true or truer than the other one even if those gods’ teachings proclaim their existence is exclusive and both gods cannot both be true. This boils down to human pride being able to tolerate a Higher Being only on the grounds that THEY create HIM/HER, and not the other way around:

“How DARE you imply that MY imaginary god, coming out of MY culture and pieced together by generations of MY ancestral people is not as good as YOUR imaginary god, coming out of YOUR culture and pieced together by generations of YOUR ancestral people – that’s CULTURAL IMPERIALISM!

While it is true that different peoples seek to know and understand The Almighty through the lens of their own cultures and traditions and histories and backgrounds, such a statement still reduces The Almighty to the grounds of a human creation, not the other way around. And a human creation, however magnificent, has no right to tell ME what to do unless I so choose – ESPECIALLY if it is SOMEONE ELSE’S human creation doing so!

But what if there IS a God – One who existed before us, exists apart from us, exists in His reality whether we believe or acquiesce or not, and in His existence created us and all the universe in which we live? What if this God has expectations and has set up His universe under His rules and ordinances, whether we chose to know and believe in these things or not, and that, after death, He will judge us on what HE has dictated and not what WE have allowed Him to dictate, whether we like it or not, believe in it or not, accept it or not?

That is why, in a nutshell, the idea of an Absolute God who is beyond human control or command, is both terrifying and hugely offensive to human pride, unless He is pared down to our level.

(Ah, you say – but what if such a God’s demands or even attempts to communicate with us have been altered or corrupted through the filter of human ego and agenda on the part of those through whom the communications were originally received or by who in the present day controls it? Is this still human pride and arrogance lusting to control other people, under the guise of “Divine Directive”?)

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

That is a legitimate concern. But when great pain has been taken by many to preserve and protect the accuracy of the original message, vast time expense has passed without the message fragmenting or disappearing into antiquity, and a sense of continuity bears up under a multiplicity of sources so a Dead Sea manuscript of Isaiah penned thousands of years ago still pretty much matches up to one published last year from the previous sources material, retranslated many times over the years and the original long gone – all these things speak to the message as a Truth that transcends human plot and agenda.

So... what if there is a Universal God of Absolute Truth who is the originator of both the physical world, and of humanity and its various physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual gifts above and beyond the abilities of animals? Creation demands this by its complexity and design. What If such a God would take a personal interest in the Creation He labored so to bring into being? (Does our Corvette-restoring gentleman from the earlier example have a personal interest in his Corvette?) And what if such a God, having desires and expectations for His highest order of physical created beings, should therefore be morally obligated to communicate such with them – both from His personal investment in them and from His sense of Justice and Fairness?

What if we had somehow become a fallen race – as an entire race having rejected His existence and His right to reign over us and tell us what to do, long ago? What if this has, as a result, become hard-wired into the Human psyche, so we do not “chose to reject” and individually depart from His standard, but that we rather are BORN into an already “have rejected” condition, by our spiritual genetics, and the personal decision is not “whether to reject,” but rather, “whether to believe and seek to be restored to what used to be” the relationship with Him from which all humanity is fallen?

What if He loves us? What if He is still just, the pinnacle of responsibility for HIS laws and actions, but loves us so much He just can’t let us go without making a way back for those who would believe Him and so choose?

If Gravity is still gravity, apart from human permission to be so, is it any the less sensible to assume that the Creator of this very intricate and organized Universe would be the same?

What if resistance is futile, and we find in the end that “all roads do lead to God,” as the old saying goes, but we find at the end of life that the God to whom they lead is a God of Judgement, obliged to carry out His Justice of the Universe and carry out Justice for all who have offended, regardless of His love?

Is it that much of an imposition to at least allow the open teaching of this God by His followers to our populations, leaving them with the right to make their own decisions but with the knowledge of what He requires so that they can make an intelligent decision?

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

Why is that so threatening to our societies, our educators, our scientists?

Yes, there are parts of His Scriptures that sound like fairy tales to the modern scientific ears. Yes, there are fanatics and teachers out there with agendas and hypocrites and unstable persons who “twist and distort the Scriptures” (REFERENCE). These must be perceived and weeded out, based upon the overall teaching of Scripture.

But why is it such a threat to the world to allow the open teaching of the Bible? (And its comparison to the teaching of that of other gods and scriptures?)

It’s not “scientific”. Perhaps – but, again, Science grew out of observation of and dependence upon an orderly and consistent universe. (There are even “scientific laws” stated, which even in atheism are acknowledged to exist over and apart from our creation of them or willingness to believe in them.)

The Bible states of human pride, “They shut you out [from us] in order that you may seek them.” [REFERENCE].

We are taught we must believe in a science that demands an orderly, highly complex Universe ... that was created and continues to evolve out of a meaningless, creatorless, ownerless random series of events. (Unless you are willing to believe that a superior race of Space Aliens did the planning and order behind Creation, which acknowledges a Creator God, but once again gives a “God-Substitute” who explains away the Creation’s realities but with a human creation as Creator – having no demands or expectations beyond what humans deem acceptable.

What if there IS a Creator, above and apart from us, and we ARE responsible as to our response to the evidence of His existence, and – what IF – being placed under the confines of HIS requirements in HIS universe turns out to, if embraced, be not a PRISON, but a BLESSING? What if we put ASIDE our human pride and jealousy and resentment at not being the supreme dictator of truth ourselves, and at least seek Him out, and even, perhaps, RESPOND to placing ourselves BACK under HIS ownership and authority?

What if that was the way things were MEANT to work, all along?

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

Today’s Old Testament bible readings were taken from a time, centuries and generations ago, when Man was more primitive in his inventions and “knowledge” and was a lot more willing to embrace that “what if”.

Almost every civilization and people group had some sort of God upon whom they hung their existence and good fortunes. The idea that humans themselves were the one true God would have sounded ludicrous. But god varied from god in temperament and requirement – some were brutal, some were capricious, some lustful and angry and prone to shifts of moods without much warning. Most had distinctively human traits and failings, betraying from whom they had really originated.

But there was Jehovah / Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews. He was unlike the others, by His own admission. And he had purposed to build a people for Himself out of a single married couple and had set about to prove His trustworthiness over generations to this people, by His actions and faithfulness, even when His commands went against common sense or normal human reasoning.

Today’s story, from Genesis, illustrates such an example of this.

Abraham had been a man blessed by God, and now he was old. He had a son named Isaac. One day, -- to Abraham – who by now was very rich and had vast holdings – summoned his head trusted servant, the one he had appointed over all his possessions, and made a strange request:

“Swear to me,” Abraham commanded, “that you will NOT choose a wife for my son from among the pagan people among whom we live but will go back to the land of our fathers and pick a wife for him there!”

How would you like to be the assistant to the CEO at a major company, and get THAT request from the boss?

“Don’t worry,” Abraham continued. “The LORD will send His angel ahead of you to show you who He chooses for my son’s wife-to-be.” “BUT”, he added, “if she doesn’t want to come, you are off the hook as to your vow to me.”

That was a heady job – to take a trip for Boss Man back to the place where he grew up, WITHOUT Boss Man and Boss Son along, and then choose a wife and return with her ... hoping that Boss Man, Boss Son, AND God Almighty Himself will approve of your choice!

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

It called for a huge amount of faith, as the costs of making a mistake would be high. The Head Servant could have balked, looked for a way out. He could have gone grudgingly. He could have procrastinated, not thinking about it until he had to. He could have planned a vacation for himself, under the guise of a business trip, just “trusting” God and along the way picking out some girl to bring home to Isaac. He could have gone, come back, and then told his master, “Your God didn’t send anyone my way, so I came home”.

But no. the man trusted Abraham, his master, and knew God had been faithful to the one who had given him the command. So, he also trusted Abraham’s God, Jehovah – and he went.

He didn’t just go, however. Abraham had assured him that Jehovah would send His angel before him to ensure success, yes. But the servant didn’t just want to ride on the coattails of his master’s faith. He wanted a personal link with Jehovah of his own, as well. So, he prayed.

It is interesting to look at the content of the Servant’s prayer as he embarked on his mission:

- 1) Praise. He opened by telling God that he recognized that He, God, was the One who had made his master great.
- 2) Obedience and Need: The Servant pointed out that Abraham respected God’s requirement to not have his son marry a pagan woman from the lost peoples among whom Abraham was called to live. (That commandment still applies – REFERENCE).
- 3) Worship. He issued his request, not as a command to God, but as an acknowledgement that God was the authority and could grant the request “if He wished”.
- 4) Specific Request: He requested some concrete way to know God’s choice of a wife for Isaac, and suggested a scenario that would tip him off if God was so willing.
- 5) Thanksgiving. When it happened, the Servant immediately gave credit and appreciation to God for granting his request – even before he knew if Rebekah would accept the invitation, or not.

The servant did not just bark out his need – “Hey, God! I need a wife for my master Abraham! And you’d better come through because this trip is costing him a lot, and my neck is on the line here!” He humbled himself first and approached God as a servant approaches a king, even knowing he was beloved.

So, the heavenly part of the deal was satisfied: Rebekah was the one. But note that Rebekah was still given a choice, as well. She could have said, “no”.

What do we know about Rebekah from this passage? 1) She was a direct relation to the one who had sent the Servant – she was Abraham’s niece. (Imagine arriving in a strange town and stopping at a restaurant for a cup of coffee and to get your bearings before you begin your mission – and then finding the waitress serving you is related to the one who sent you!)



“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

2) She was conscientious, a cheerful servant to others, and willing to work – she drew water for her family and was willing to draw from the well for a tired stranger, as well.

3) She was compassionate – “Let me draw for your camels, as well!”

4) She was beautiful, but then, so was Jezebel. (“Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that fears the LORD, she shall be praised” – REFERENCE).

We know the rest of the story. Rebekah and her family provided a place for the Servant and his camels and men to stay overnight, and Rebekah decided that she would accept the choice – having come from God – and go back with him to be Isaac’s wife. The Servant produced some riches as proof of his master’s authenticity (which brother Laban saw, giving him ideas in the future of a rich family he could milk, but that is another story!) Rebekah and the Servant returned, Isaac received his wife, Rebekah thought he was cool, and the Servant appeared before his master Abraham, having accomplished the work he had been given to do.

So, what can we take home from all this?

God calls us out of our world-focused lives to respond to challenges He gives. The first challenge is to confront the fact that He exists, that He is not a human creation, that we are not the ultimate definers of truth and justice and morality ourselves, and that we are accountable to Him – but this is just the first and most basic Divine Appointment of many that we will face, throughout our lives.

Like the Steward, we can embrace the challenge and respond positively to God’s challenges. We can draw near to Him and then proceed, even before we are assured of the outcome, assured He will “send His angel before us” and guide us in our way. Or...

Or we can run from the challenge, from the truth. We can shout that there is no God but that which we create and approve. We can shout that reality is what we make of it, and truth that we do not recognize or subscribe to and believe in ceases to be reality and that we are free of it. That we will never be called into account if we do not first agree to give the reality permission to exist.

We can go it alone. We can create God-substitutes, be they stone idols, governments, Hollywood celebrities, the opinion of the crowd, or atheistic scientists. We can assure us that they can save us and that their declarations are the only truth that really exists.

“CHOICE: WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Ken Bailey, for Fountain Park Global Methodist Church sermon, July 8-9, 2023.

But we have a choice. And even making no choice in response is a choice. One for which we will someday answer.

God in the present-day kind of hides behind a curtain. He gives us enough proof to assure us of His reality, makes overtures to us to win our trust, and then retreats behind His creation, having promised eventual reward for serving Him, but asks for the service first, based upon trust – having given just enough riches in the present day to make a guarantee of what is to come later (like the Servant presenting Rebekah with valuable bracelets as proof of rich Abraham’s reality).

It may seem like a long shot to trust the Lord and seek obedient relationship with Him, given the world in which we live.

But a man named Abraham once met God in his path, and trusted him, and willingly did what He asked, in leaving his homeland to set out for a new land of promise. Much later, after Abraham had inherited blessing from that same God, his longtime relationship with Him led a trusted Servant to receive another difficult challenge and seek to trust his master’s God for relationship as he went, even as he had long seen his master Abraham do.

That Servant was rewarded with success in his mission. And, because of his example, a young woman named Rebekah was willing to leave her homeland for a husband of promise in a new land.

We all struggle with the choice to hide or to embrace when God’s challenges come our way. It is human to hide, but hiding doesn’t really fix the situation, it just lulls us into a false reality with a false sense of security.

Let us encourage one another to embrace God’s challenges, to start by seeking to draw near to Him in relationship during them, and then to walk on in faith. Let us build one another up. And let us ask of God that we ourselves who know him may live in such a way that others, watching us, are given the desire and the courage to seek to know Him themselves. Let us pray...