

**Choices We Make**  
**Genesis 13:1-18**  
**October 21, 2018**

I'm sure we've all seen films or read novels in which the main character is faced with a life-changing decision. A choice to be made! ***Sophie's Choice***, both the novel and the film were a huge success in the early 80's (She won the Oscar). Sophie, played by Meryl Streep, a Roman Catholic and Auschwitz survivor, confesses to Stingo what had happened to her and her children. Sentenced to a concentration camp, the book and film are centered on a scene in Auschwitz where Sophie has just arrived with her ten-year old son and her seven-year old daughter. They meet the sadistic Doctor Mengele who tells her that she can only bring one of her children; one will be allowed to live while the other is to be killed. As a mother, Sophie adores both of her children and can't make this agonizing choice until several soldiers force her and she hastily gives her daughter to them, sobbing as they take her little girl away.

None of us hopefully have to make such a horrendous choice. But we do face choices every day. Often in films and novels self-interest wins out in the choices of the characters. Not in Sophie's case. But for many this is the determining factor. Perhaps watching films and reading novels and seeing how political powers operate over thirty years after ***Sophie's Choice***, we realize how self-interest has become a stronger force in Western society. Perhaps the widespread greed and consumerism that has developed since the 80's is symptomatic of this trend.

Self-interest is not limited to personal greed. It has come to characterize life within our global relationships. Even in Canada self-interest is seen in our poor standing among developed countries in foreign aid as a percentage of our wealth. In our foreign aid as a percentage of our GNP our standing is quite low among the richest nations on earth. We give under 3% of total GNP, which is still well below the UN target of 7%. The United States is actually worse at fewer than 2%. Personal charitable giving is equally depressing in Canada.

How could it be otherwise, you ask? Is that not natural? Perhaps it is a natural response in societies that have lost touch with the foundations of the Judeo Christian story.

Thankfully there are exceptions to this trend. The movie **Shindler's List** is based on the true story of Oskar Schindler, a Czech born German businessman who tried to make his fortune during the Second World War by exploiting cheap Jewish labour. As World War II progresses, and the fate of the Jews becomes more and more clear, Schindler's motivations switch from profit to human sympathy and he is able to save over 1100 Jews from death in the gas chambers. He chose to abandon self-interest because of the plight of men and women under his care.

In our story today of Abraham and Lot we encounter a man who shows two different sides of himself. Like you I probably relate to his dilemma in Egypt. Let's hear it now.

During Abraham's sojourn in Egypt he behaves like a scared rabbit. He is never heard to pray; he seems riddled by anxiety and fear which leads him to ask his wife Sarah to lie to Pharaoh that she is his sister. *"Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."*

He trusts in his own shrewdness to protect his life. He seems motivated by self-interest and is willing to sacrifice his wife for his own survival. As it turns out Abraham comes out of this with only a red face. But he also, we notice, continues to be blessed by God. He exits Egypt a richer man than when he entered it.

It's encouraging in a way, isn't it, to know that even the greatest saints of the bible had their times of spiritual bankruptcy. Most of us can identify with Abraham. There are times in each of our lives when anxiety, fear, and self absorption shape our decisions. In less stressful times we pray, say we depend on God's love and goodness, and even are generous to our neighbour. But then suddenly we turn a corner in our lives and find ourselves in what Bunyan called the *Slough of Despond* in his classic **Pilgrim's Progress**.

I confess to entering such a time in my life, soon after I became a Christian, when I slipped into a period of un-faith. I worked in a Trust

Company on Bay St in downtown Toronto in the 60's. Those were heady days. While it wasn't a happy time in my life, I was caught up in the promise secularism and modern life offered. The freedom and happiness promised seemed irresistible. I remember well how callous and competitive I became in my workplace, how anxious I felt about my need for a meaningful relationship, and how ambitious I was for personal status and success. Modernity contained a powerful optimism and offered the promise of fulfillment and happiness. But in reality my choices didn't lead me to inner happiness, but rather emptiness, frustration and feeling lost and alone.

Both Abraham and Lot came out of Egypt with great wealth. Their herds had grown and their net worth in gold and silver had increased. So much so in fact, that the places where they camped became battle grounds between the different factions within the camp. The bickering, fighting, and conflict became too much for Abraham to bear. In this case, however, Abraham seeks peace by putting his self interest on the shelf.

*Then Abram said to Lot: Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.*

Lot can choose the east, west, north or south and Abraham will go in the opposite direction. Abraham gives his nephew first choice. Lot naturally saw that the valley to the east looked the most fertile and chose that as his land.

But Abraham's magnanimous act was not based merely on his love for his nephew or his desire for peace. Fundamentally it was based on God's initial promise to him that he would inherit this land, all of it.

*The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. <sup>17</sup>Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." (Genesis 13:14ff).*

On this promise Abraham chose his future.

Lot's choice, like perhaps some of our choices in life, was based on self-interest. The eastern fertile valley looked the most promising, the most productive, hence the most valuable. Did he choose wisely? We ought to note that Lot's choice also moved him close to Sodom. Genesis tells us that the inhabitants of Sodom were, shall we say, not the best choice of neighbours. His choice had consequence.

Saints in the bible display all the flaws we see in ourselves. In Egypt Abraham is weak, scared, self-interested, and seems discombobulated. Once out of Egypt Abraham is magnanimous, generous, and faithful. Will the real Abraham stand up! Perhaps the two faces of Abraham are found in us. Like Abraham we are all a curious mixture of both anxiety and self-interest as well as faith and altruism. On the one hand we try through our shrewdness and guile to resolve our problems; on the other hand we are praying and trusting in God's promises.

If you happen to be in the Egypt mode right now, that's fine because we all visit there once in a while. None of us are better than Abraham. We too make bad choices at times. Self-interest often comes to our door with powerful persuasion. But Abraham didn't stay in Egypt. Neither do we have to. Tomorrow perhaps we will be on much less threatening ground, much less anxious territory and we will find ourselves resting in God's promises once again.

Abraham ultimately trusted these promises. We can too. Let's not get bogged down in society's quest for security in possessions. Let's not continue to base our lives on our self-interest, but instead on love of God and neighbour. Such a choice will guarantee a fuller humanity along with the gifts of joy and peace.

**Amen**

Readings: Genesis 13:1-18; Proverbs 3:5-10; Matthew 6:19-21