**SERMON 2-23-2020**

**DEUTERONOMY 30:8-20**

Bill Miner was a Wild West legend.

He robbed his first stage coach when he was 16 years old.

He was credited with originating the line which has played

          on thousands of Westerns: "Hands up!"

Stagecoach passengers called him the Gentleman Bandit because

          he never shot anyone, and he spoke respectfully, using "Sir" or "Ma'am".

 In 1901 Bill got out of San Quentin Prison

          where he had served 33 years altogether.

It was his third stint, and both previous times

          he had barely sniffed free air before landing in jail again.

Each time he was glad to be out of prison.

He complained about the food, his uncomfortable bed, and the constant boredom.

Now, at the very beginning of the 20 th  century,  he was glad to be free once more.

When Bill emerged from prison at the age of 58, his long hair had turned grey,

          and most of his friends had either died or disappeared.

Stepping into a new century, he had a new lease on life.

No stagecoaches were left to rob: the Wells Fargo company had sold their horses

          and invested in something he had never seen, steam trains.

Miner tried various odd jobs,

          but most work seemed degrading and boring to a former stagecoach robber.

The old restlessness returned.

One afternoon, in a Seattle theater, he watched the movie

          "The Great Train Robbery", and discovered a new career,

          or at least a new twist on an old one.

The Gentleman Bandit, at age 60, became the Grey Fox.

He went on to mastermind 6 train robberies,

          until the Mounties tracked him down in British Columbia.

Three separate times Bill Miner had a chance for a new start.

The last time, he had entered a new city, in a new century,

          with no one around to remind him of his reputation.

Yet inevitably he went back to the familiar ways of crime.

He could have chosen a new path several times – but he did not.

It was his choice. But old habits die hard.

People have not really changed very much at all.

The Israelites faced a similar situation to Bill Miner's life.

Four decades in the Desert of Sinai felt like imprisonment.

They grumbled, murmured, complained about the heat,

          the lack of food and water, and the relentless waiting.

And then the long-awaited day of freedom arrived

The Israelites were jubilant.

Finally, they were going to enter the Promised Land.

Moses struggled to prepare the people for this new life.

He knew the people too well.

He found it difficult to believe they were now going to live God's way.

He reminded the people how they had agreed to serve God.

He told them if they were obedient to God,

          they would be blessed;

          if they were disobedient, they would be cursed.

"What I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you

          or beyond your reach.

You don't have to send someone up to heaven to get God's teaching.

You do not have to cross the sea to receive God's commands.

God's word is with you.

It is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

I command you today to love the Lord your God,

          walk in obedience to him, keep his commands, decrees and laws.

Teach God's law to your children.

I set before you today: life and prosperity, or death and destruction.

The choices you make will make all the difference

          in your life, and the lives of your children."

As clearly as he could, Moses presented the choices facing the Israelites.

They were on their own.

They held their destiny in their own hands.

He appealed to their unique calling as a nation:

          God had chosen them as a priestly kingdom, and his treasured possession.

Moses seemed to fear the coming prosperity

          even more than the rigors of the desert, and he voiced those fears.

In the promised land, a lush country of streams and fruit trees,

          and valuable resources, the Israelites might forget God

          and begin to take credit for their own success.

Moses kept urging the people:

          "Remember! Remember the desolate desert, and God's faithfulness there.

          Do not forget God, as you enter the promised land."

They would have to make many choices as they entered the promised land.

Moses hoped, yet doubted, they would make good choices.

For 40 years Moses led the complaining, murmuring cranky assortment of tribes.

He had listened to their grumbling, endured their gossip,

          and survived their insurrections.

Now he was warning them not to repeat their ways.

But he knew that the Israelites' settling down into a life of quiet obedience

          was about as likely as Bill Miner becoming a banker.

The Israelites had many important choices to make.

The laws they were to obey were more than a simple rulebook.

They were directions for a whole new way of life.

Today we have many of the same choices to make.

Will we live God's way, or our way?

It still makes all the difference.

We choose between life and prosperity, or death and destruction.

The choices we make will make all the difference

          in our lives, and the lives of our children.

Will we love and trust God?

Are we willing to follow even the difficult rules:

          Love your enemy.

          Forgive those who hurt you.

          Pray for your enemies.

          Love and care for your neighbor – all of them.

The disciples of Jesus proved faithful to him,

          yet most of them lived through poverty and  persecution,

          and died martyrs' deaths.

And they wouldn't have lived any other way.

They loved God.

They trusted him.

So they followed him.

We are free to decide.

We are free to choose.

God won't force us either way.

However, God does not leave us all on our own either.

When we seek him, He is there.

When we ask for his help, he gives it.

He leads, guides, strengthens, encourages, and helps us.

No matter how many times we make poor choices, He will be with us.

We do not have to follow the example of Bill Miner or the Israelites.

We have a choice to make

The choice is ours.

What a difference our choices can make in our lives.

AMEN