Is it better to succeed as a nation at any cost so long as security and prosperity are maintained or is it more important to preserve a nation’s integrity even if that puts prosperity and security at risk? Of course, usually the choices aren’t that stark. Most countries experience a sort of middle ground between them. But here at the end of their journey across the desert and at the border of the Promised Land, the people are presented with what sounds like an either/or decision.

This is a tense moment for Israel. They have to decide who they’re going to be, what sort of a nation they’ll become, and how they will be different from all the surrounding nations. It all has to do with their willingness to follow God’s ways, a set of rules for living they’ve been given through their leader Moses. So what does that mean; what are these rules?

The Ten Commandments might come to mind for a lot of us. It was on this journey, after their escape from Egypt that Moses went to the mountain and returned bearing the tablets with the commandments written on them. Many scholars believe that list of ten rules actually represents a distillation of the whole Law or Torah and not the starting point. As we read further in the story through Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy we find the commandments expanded to cover everything from ritual sacrifices to preparation of food to relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and even treatment of animals. It is a staggering number of “commandments, decrees and ordinances.”

But if you look closely at them one thing stands out over and over. In this relationship with God there are two qualities that are necessary: justice and compassion. Those are the qualities this covenant is built on. Without justice and compassion, none of it will stand. And they aren’t arbitrary qualities; justice and compassion are learned from God. So the choice the people are asked to make is whether they will continue to live in the image of the God who led them out of slavery and liberated them or, as they’re told, “bow down to other gods.”

When we refuse to apply justice and compassion to our actions toward others, we are bowing down to other gods. It’s as simple as that. Justice and compassion are the values that shape our treatment of the hungry and homeless, the sick or incarcerated, the immigrant and refugee. When we regard the weakest and most vulnerable among us with contempt or treat them with suspicion and fear, we obscure God’s image in ourselves and in the world. As Paul might say, we cease to be “God’s field.”

Last month on the trip to Israel we had a chance to visit Yad B’shem, the Holocaust Museum. I had heard or seen most of the information we received there in one place or another, but I had never experienced all of it all at once. They walked us through a historical progression, beginning with cultural expressions of anti-Semitism that were common in Europe and much of the U.S. through the rhetorical campaign of Hitler and the Nazis until the rhetoric became policy
and Jews were targeted as the scapegoats for German society whose elimination, through extermination, was the only solution. It was chilling how quickly that society turned. One thing I remember hearing about was the absolute astonishment many Jews felt that this kind of hatred and irrational fear could come from the neighbors and co-workers they had always known.

And how quickly that hatred and fear spread. One story I heard about that I had never heard before was of the ship The St. Louis. In November of 1938, following the assassination of a German diplomat, a pogrom against Jews was carried out across Germany, targeting homes, Jewish-owned businesses and synagogues; it became known as Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass and marks the beginning of the Holocaust. In May of 1939 a group of German Jews booked passage on an ocean liner called the S.S. St. Louis heading for Cuba. About 1000 people were on the ship, their papers all in order. But on the way the Cuban government changed the rules regarding taking refugees and wouldn’t allow them to dock. After days of negotiations they finally turned toward the U.S. but were prevented from docking by the Coast Guard. Eventually they had to turn back to Europe. While they were taken in by various other countries, Holland, Belgium, France and Great Britain, many of the people on that ship were captured by the Nazis and died in concentration camps.

Our country had a chance to take a stand as early as 1939 against the horror being unleashed in Germany but we refused. We didn’t allow justice and compassion to shape our actions but gave in to the gods of fear and hatred, hiding behind diplomacy and protocol. That experience taught us and the whole world something about the need for justice and compassion toward people being persecuted because of their religion or nationality or ethnicity. When Jews today say “never again” they aren’t referring only to persecution of Jews, they mean never again should anyone be targeted for persecution or genocide while the world watches in silence.

But it all comes down to the choices we make: curse or blessing, death or life. Will a policy of rounding up and deporting undocumented immigrants really make us a safer nation? There may be some who have committed crimes that forfeit the privilege of living here, but there are many others who are living responsibly, raising their kids and contributing to their communities. Surely justice and compassion doesn’t paint them all with the same brush. And is refusing to allow refugees into the country a true expression of who we are as a people? We can’t take in all of them, there are over 65 million who have been displaced, but surely justice and compassion leads us to do what we can.

These are the choices we are faced with as we stand at the river’s edge, ready to cross over to a new world. How we choose to respond to the world’s needs will shape us for generations to come. Just like Paul and Apollos and their companions, we are planting something here. What might grow we have no way of knowing, but the choices we make now will set the direction of that growth toward or away from God. Moses understood that at the very beginning. He understood that a people is measured by more than a set of rules or a shared experience. A people’s value is measured by their commitments, by the choices they make when the risks are greatest. Do we fall into fear and suspicion, close ourselves off in times of uncertainty or do we stand for justice and compassion and risk our security for a greater good? “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live!”
Amen