

## *Choices in the Wilderness*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON LUKE 4:1-13

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*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2a)*

IT'S NOT THE INITIATION INTO A LIFE OF FAITH YOU MIGHT EXPECT, especially for one who would be known as the Son of God. Hardly dry from his baptism, Jesus was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where . . . he was tempted" – a better word is "tested" or "proven," as one might test a raw recruit's quality, commitment, or readiness for service.

And there he was forced to choose. Hungry, famished, he had to make the hard choice between food for his body and food for his soul. Faced with the opportunity to use worldly power to serve God's purpose, he had to make the hard choice to let go of that kind of power so he could worship and serve God alone. Vulnerable and craving protection and safety, he was forced to make the hard choice of a faith that made no promise of protection and safety but promised only authentic relationship with God.

And even after forty days it wasn't over. Luke's report ends with the ominous segue, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*" Apparently all that's finished of his testing here is round one. There will be more hard choices, more questions about his commitment to the way he has chosen, more opportunities to settle for a life that's ordinary and comfortable.

There will also be more opportunities to choose the way of God and of life over the way of the world, the way of death. And every choice will be a hard, distressing one. But "the distresses of choice," poet W.H. Auden wrote, "are our chance to be blessed." And in each of the distressing choices Jesus would have to make was an opportunity to be blessed, an opportunity to live the life God promised and for which God created us.

That's part of what Lent is about for us. It's a testing to see if we're up to following through on the commitment we made at our baptism or when we confirmed our baptismal vows. And the testing will come in our hard, everyday choices, not choices between good and bad, right and wrong, which are relatively easy, but the really hard,

meaningful, life- and soul-shaping choices between good and better or between better and best. And in those choices our quality, our commitment, our readiness for service as disciples of Jesus will be tested. And in those choices we may be blessed.

The early church was faced with those choices right out of the gate and found it needed help getting back on track, so this forty-day season of prayer and self-denial developed. There was no Lent for the earliest church. It arose later, when, as Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor has pointed out, "the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith." Here's how she described those early days before Lent came into being.

When the world did not end as Jesus himself had said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God the way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth.

Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for – if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They were not arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy, and God moaned out loud.<sup>1</sup>

If Taylor's description of the cooling of the Spirit sounds a little too familiar, if it makes you squirm in your seat a little – or especially if it does *not* make you squirm in your seat – maybe it's time to pinch yourself awake. Come to your senses, look again at the choices you have to make every day, especially the hard, distressing ones. Don't think of them as choices you'd like to avoid but rather as your chance to be blessed, as your opportunity to live the life God offers. As Aldous Huxley wrote:

The choice is always ours. Then let me choose  
The longest art, the hard Promethean way  
Cherishingly to tend and feed and fan  
That inward fire, whose small precarious flame,  
Kindled or quenched creates  
The noble or the ignoble [persons] we are,  
The worlds we live in and the very fates,  
Our bright or muddy star.<sup>2</sup>

NOTES: • 1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Settling for Less," *The Christian Century*, 18 February 1998. • 2. Aldous Huxley, quoted in *The Choice Is Always Ours*, ed. Dorothy Berkley Phillips (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 76.