

2017-03-05\_Sermon  
Crucial Choices  
Matthew 3:1-11

Every one of us has made and will make crucial choices in our lives. When we reflect on our past choices which have resulted in where we are now, we often didn't realize at the time how crucial they were. I remember that a choice I made to cram for a final exam in the FSU Library one Saturday afternoon nearly 52 years ago (instead of watching a ball game on TV) resulted in my meeting Linda. As I can say, the rest is history! We began a relationship which resulted in our marriage three years later. We never know how crucial our choices can be.

One of the overriding themes of this Lenten season is the importance of making choices.

There is a part of us which doesn't like to make choices because it means excluding many attractive options in favor of a course which might or might not turn out for us. There is always a risk when a choice is made.

Today's Gospel shows Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit into a risky situation—facing the Devil himself. It would be the most crucial 40 days of His earthly life. Up to this point, Jesus' choices recorded in Holy Scripture had been relatively easy.

Jesus had chosen at age 12 to remain in the Temple with the doctors of the Law instead of leaving with His parents after what was probably His Bar Mitzvah. What a marvelous experience that must have been as Jesus heard these renowned scholars and asked them questions! People marveled at Jesus' understanding and answers. For the next 18 years, Jesus chose to remain subject to His parents after they returned to Nazareth. (Luke 2:41-51)

This choice bore good fruit as Luke (2:52) said that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”

However, the next recorded choice made by Jesus permanently altered the course of His earthly life. Jesus chose to be baptized by John the Baptist as a sign that He would “fulfill all righteousness.”(Matthew 3:15)

Jesus’ decision to be baptized produces a momentous revelation. Jesus receives confirmation of two facts—His identity as God’s Son and His mission to suffer for the world’s sins. The voice from heaven declares Jesus’ identity. “Thou art my beloved Son.”(Psalm 2:7). Then the voice goes on to define Jesus’ mission by quoting Isaiah 42:1—the Suffering Servant Song—“in whom I am well pleased.” Moreover, John the Baptist had confirmed the suffering servant role to Jesus when he first set eyes on Him when he exclaimed, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”(John 1:29)

Up until then, Jesus' choices produced happy results—admiration for His great learning—good fruit from His obedience as an earthly son.

The choice to be baptized by John, however, produced a greater dilemma. Jesus had taken an awesome step to be identified with our need for repentance—for that was what John's baptism was all about. Even though Jesus never committed a sinful act, Jesus chose to cross a spiritual bridge between heaven and us. He slipped into enemy territory to rescue us from our proclivity to sin. Jesus chose to cross the bridge of the cross to bring us back into reunion with God.

It was a momentous choice, but the results this time would be far from pleasant for Him. Jesus' life immediately became more complicated as Satan confronted Him with three dilemmas.

They involved Jesus' personal human needs, His passion to glorify God, and His desire to be effective with people.

Jesus' first crucial choice had to do with His human needs, not only His own, but also His desire to meet the human needs of others.

Because He was "full of the Holy Spirit," as a result of His baptism, Jesus was able to abstain from food for forty days—much longer than any human being could. It had been a miraculous time for Him. Being "led up by the Spirit," Jesus felt no need for earthly food during that forty day time. His concentration was focused on perceiving God's will for Him as it had been revealed at His baptism. Undoubtedly, He meditated on what it meant to be the Lamb of God. His mind and spirit explored the ramifications of being the one, sufficient sacrifice to removed the authority of sin over the world. Yes, He would suffer, but He would be sustained by heaven as He went through it.

But now on this fortieth day, Jesus was brought back to an awareness of His human needs as He hears the tempting voice of Satan.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

(Matthew 4:3)

Jesus had been meditating on His role as the Son of God for forty days. It would be a servant's role. Would it involve providing and serving food to meet people's physical needs? Then He thought of His own hunger. Jesus was now very aware that He hadn't eaten for forty days. Turning these stones into bread would be a simple way to prove to Him and others that He is truly the Son of God. It would confirm in Jesus' own mind His identity. There would be times in the future that Jesus would feed people with multiplied loaves of bread. Wouldn't it be right to end His fast in a similar miraculous fashion?

At this point, Jesus took a hard look at His motives and recognized that His desire for self-affirmation was tempting Him at this point. It was not compassion for others as would be the case in the feeding of the five thousand. Thus Jesus responded with a God-centered affirmation to thwart Satan's temptation.

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.’ ”

(Matthew 4:4)

There is an invisible line when human desire becomes our master rather than our motivator for life. When our desire is to do God's will, it will never enslave us because living in God's will keeps every human need in proper balance and perspective for us. Our legitimate human needs are met, but those needs will never dictate the direction of our lives.

Having faced the temptation based on human need, Jesus is confronted with a second dilemma. He asks Himself this question. How am I to glorify God? Why not glorify God by demonstrating God's power to the multitudes. In fact, I can demonstrate the truth of God's word in the process. That would certainly glorify God.

“Then the Devil took Him to the Holy City and set Him on the pinnacle of the Temple” and quoted Him a section of Psalm 91. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

(Matthew 4:5-6/Psalm 91:11-12)

What a subtle temptation! The Devil is not above using scripture—admittedly out of its proper context—to mislead believers.

Psalm 91's message promises protection from Satan's malignant, supernatural evil, yet Satan uses this passage in a totally different way to persuade Jesus to test God's power. It could be a public demonstration that God's power is for real.

At this point, Jesus perceives a deeper meaning of God's power and presence and He makes a crucial choice. God will be glorified by Jesus' perfect obedience, not by a public test designed to shock and awe people into believing God and the validity of Jesus' mission. Thus Jesus remembers another scripture from Deuteronomy 6:16.

“Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

One does not glorify God by testing Him. God can only be glorified by our unqualified obedience. This is what Jesus offers and that is what makes perfect God's required sacrifice which Jesus makes for our sins.

Having used the word of God to confront Satan's temptations of letting human needs dictate His choices and using shock and awe to intimidate people into belief, Jesus is now confronted with a third question requiring a crucial response. How can His ministry be effective with people? How is Jesus going to employ power to change the direction of the world into a God-centered direction?

Satan offers Jesus the levers of earthly power by showing Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory saying to Him, "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." (Matthew 4:9)

In the human realm, the most successful handlers of power are those who make the most adroit compromises. The compromisers seem to get things done while those who stick to firm principles end up martyrs.

This third temptation puts Jesus into a dilemma. How is He to utilize power to carry out His saving mission?

Jesus knows that He needs power to save people from their sins. Satan promises Jesus earthly power to reform corrupt earthly political and economic practices, but the price is compromising His heavenly authority by falling down and worshipping Satan. Satan would have gained his objective of displacing God by having God-incarnate worship him.

At this point, Jesus makes a crucial choice. He rejects earthly power and embraces a different kind of power from a heavenly source. The roadmap to this heavenly power is the word of God. Thus Jesus commands Satan to “be gone” as He recalls two passages from the Books of Zechariah and Deuteronomy.

“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’ ”(Zechariah 3:1-2/Deuteronomy 6:13) Septuagint Translation

The source of Jesus' power to save us comes from no created source. Thus it cannot be compromised or changed by any source other than the Creator Himself. Even if the earthly results of using this power mean death on the cross, that event does not terminate this power because the source of this power does not die.

This power of Jesus has great effectiveness in human life. It is the power to transform us from within. It uses internal motivation rather than external force. It appears in human life as weakness, but it is actually strength. It seems to bring death to us, but it is actually the gate to life as life-destroying forces are put to death within us. It is this power that Jesus exuded from the cross making the cross the bridge to life.

Crucial choices! Jesus faced many of them and so do we. To avoid choosing is to avoid living.

Like Jesus in His humanity, we don't have a detailed blueprint of the implications of every choice we make. Yet when we focus on God to keep our human desires in proper balance; when we are willing to glorify God in His way rather than through our testing; when we desire our effectiveness with people to be God-centered rather than people-pleasing; then we are facing and making crucial choices that will rescue our lives for God's Kingdom and transform the world. Let our crucial choices during this Lent and beyond move us in this direction.