



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“CHOICES”
1ST SUNDAY IN LENT

GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-7

PSALM 32

ROMANS 5:12-19

MATTHEW 4:1-11

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
MARCH 1, 2020

In this week of huge Wall Street losses and global fears of a Coronavirus pandemic, I invite us to take our fears and feelings of powerlessness into the desert with Jesus. The readings on this first Sunday in Lent involve choices. Temptation is another word for choices. Lent is not about scrubbing up and making ourselves more spiritually presentable or performing acts of repentance, it is about remembering God in all our choices. Lent is not only about *what* we choose it is about *how* we choose.

Human beings have always had the power to choose. We can underestimate the significance of the everyday choices we make. Everyday choices set us on one path or another, which down the road leads us to radically different places. (Think of the cumulative impact of our collective choices about recycling - over time, we have mountainous landfills or we have a sustainable planet).

The readings stitch together a bigger tapestry than Jesus' temptations alone. In Paul's Letter to the Romans, Christ is the second Adam, undoing by faithful choices the mistakes of Adam and Eve's immature, unfaithful choices. We are taken all the way back to our spiritual ancestors in the Garden of

Eden with the crafty, subtle snake. (The snake has been described as the first theologian!). God has told Adam and Eve: don't eat from that one tree; all the other trees are fine for you. The snake amplifies the desirability of the tree: Eve is prompted to notice its surpassing beauty. She becomes persuaded of the desirability of *wisdom* that the beautiful tree promises. Eve sees the beauty and the wisdom of the tree but separates those good gifts from the relationship with God that gives the wisdom. When we separate the gifts from our relationship to the Giver, we get into trouble. We start to act as though the gifts are ours by right, to do with as we wish with no reference to God. If we ignore the relationship with God that comes with God's gifts to us, we can start to ignore our neighbor whom God commands us to love *using* those gifts. We start to become selfish, self-centered and self-referential. It becomes all about me, my world, my people, my well-being...who cares about the future, or even our neighbor today? We may remember that *Lack of concern for those who come after us* was one of the prayers of repentance we offered in the Litany of Penitence on Ash Wednesday.

The temptations of Jesus are a study in how to choose. When Jesus is vulnerable, Jesus chooses to

stand on what is firm – Scripture, the Hebrew faith tradition that shaped him. That’s a lesson in itself. When Jesus is fasting (a good spiritual practice) he becomes hungry (a human thing, which Jesus shares with us.) Hunger makes all of us vulnerable to bad choices, including bad food choices. Yet even when he is famished, Jesus refuses to choose the gift of food apart from relationship to God. Jesus doesn’t make stones into bread just because he can. Even Jesus’ Divine power is not his to do with whatever he feels like doing, whenever he wants to. On the roof of the Temple, Jesus is promised God’s protection (another good gift) but again Jesus says: I am not going to prove God’s faithfulness and love for me just because I can. God is not my performing monkey. I don’t command God; it’s the other way around. Jesus is shown the kingdoms of the world – full of splendor and beauty – it is an image of the astonishing capacity of humanity to build and create. Again, Jesus will not separate his gifts and authority from God the Giver and the claim of God on Jesus’ life and his gifts. Jesus makes *all* his choices within his relationship with God, not for his own ends.

Unlike Jesus, but like our spiritual parents Adam and Eve, often we choose to use our gifts without

remembering God the Giver. This is why we need Lent, and frequent moments of reflection and self-examination and confession. In the daily news we can see the effects of people's choices play out. Power without God can become at the extreme into pure evil, like genocide, where other people become completely expendable in a ruthless, truly wicked quest for power. In everyday life, most of us are not engaged in such radical evil and abuse of God's gifts, but we may be tempted to exercise our abilities without relationship to God in more ordinary ways. We may remember to thank God for his gifts. Yet in the daily rush of life we may act as though we can manage the implementation ourselves. We believe in God but in daily life we in fact use our capacities as we see fit. This is the essence of Jesus' temptation also: to use his God-given power for his own ends, without relationship or reference to God. Jesus is tempted in every way as we are but doesn't choose anything - not even things that seem good in themselves like food - without active relationship to God.

Lent sharpens our awareness of *how* we choose. Lent - the desert - is for deepening our relationship with God. That is what the desert does for Jesus and what

the desert does for us. The desert is a physical place and also a spiritual landscape. The desert comes to us whether we choose it or not. It comes as suffering, as spiritual poverty, as bad news, as injustice, devastating loss, and as death itself. When we are in the desert with Jesus we are reminded that God will always be with *us* in the desert, near at hand and not far off.

I was reminded of the nearness of God in an unexpected way during the decline and recent death of my mother. This is journey so many of us take as our parents age. When I first realized she was seriously ill about eighteen months ago, I was so sad. In the fall of 2018 when she was diagnosed with vascular dementia, I remember thinking: “This is it. She will be in a Care Home for the rest of her life. Gone are our wonderful, long conversations”. She became wheelchair-bound. When I visited I would feed her lunch and feel the sadness of reversed roles as someone who had been so strong, nurturing and wise continued along the trajectory of ageing. The only thing that made any sense to me spiritually at that time was the time I spent in church. I remember one Thursday in Fall of 2018 passing through the Chapel to retrieve the Reserved Sacrament from the Aumbry for a hospital visit to a sick parishioner. I paused and sat there in the Chapel for a while in

reflection, feeling desolate. To my astonishment, I began to experience light and energy from the Aumbry coming out to surround and invisibly embrace me. It was steady and strengthening. In my own spiritual life, though I fully believe in the Presence of Christ in the consecrated Bread and Wine, and have deep reverence and devotion for the Sacraments, I was never particularly drawn to praying in the presence of the Reserved Sacrament. Until that day when God met me there. I was powerfully reminded that God lives there, here, and often God makes Godself known in new ways when we are most hungry. God is always here and appears in ways that are real even in the desert. Perhaps in our fearful time, we may take this to heart and it may calm our fears.

The power of love and healing doesn't just come from God, it *is* God. The power is wherever God is, and God is everywhere, even and especially in the desert.

AMEN

THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014

TEL: 212.924.0562

FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEB SITE: WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG

EMAIL: INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG