

“A Holy Reality Show”
Gates Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 4:1-8

This is truly an action packed piece of scripture. It reads like a reality show script. Who needs writers in Hollywood anyway! It could be entitled: The Messiah Apprentice, or maybe Boogie with Satan, or how about simply Defy the Devil. Imaginethe drama opens with a mysterious Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness. For forty days and forty nights Jesus is in this place with nothing – not even food. Of course in TV land, 40 days would be reduced to a one hour episode. Then the next week the show would begin with the devil approaching the famished strung-out Jesus. This devil artfully challenges Jesus to turn stones into bread – to use his divine powers to end his hunger. Jesus, boldly, **DEFIES THE DEVIL** and as he does “To be continued” appears on the TV screen..... Continued it isepisode three begins. The devil is leading Jesus to Jerusalem – the camera focuses on the top of the temple where we see the devil tantalizing Jesus. “Jump!,” he demands, “After all if you are the Son of God - you will be protected. Just think of the publicity! You will be an instant celebrity – on the cover of magazines all over the world! Jump!” But, Jesus says “No!” sending the devil back to the drawing board. In the final episode, the two are on the road again this time the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain. He promises him all the kingdoms of the world – power, control, wealth – all Jesus has to do is to bow down and worship him. Once again Jesus says “NO” and finally the devil gives up. In reality show language – Jesus wins, the devil loses. Jesus chose God over personal comfort, material possession, fame, and power.

“What’s real about this?”, you might be asking, “a show featuring the Son of God, angels, spirits, and the devil – not exactly reality – more like a superhero movie” Actually, I think it’s fair to say that it is in fact realityour daily reality! We can choose God’s way ornot! We make decisions all day long, every day. Sometimes it’s overwhelming. It’s hard enough to decide which cereal to buy

much less the biggies like jobs, life partner, etc. It is hard to stay on track with so many choices.

I have had several opportunities to take folks from Jamaica, Guatemala, and other developing nations to Wegmans. It is definitely one of the tourist attractions in our area. I've watched the confusion and amazement as these visitors stand in front of the shampoo aisle. Inevitably, they shake their head and mumble "so many choices." I understand that feeling. Do you remember when we simply had to decide upon brand when buying toothpaste? Now there is tartar protection, whitening, cavity control, mint, lemon or vanilla. Choices are so much a part of our world – whether we are talking shampoo, toothpaste, career, money management, time commitment, behavior, college, attitude, or anything else. We are a people who are fortunate enough to have choices. Choice, however, is not only a part of our consumer world. It is, also, part of our spiritual world and, indeed, sometimes the two are interwoven. Jesus could have opted for power, wealth, material goods, ease, and comfort – he didn't. As people of faith, God calls us to make decisions from the foundation of our faith.

I am reminded of a study I did about seven years ago on the spiritual needs of young adults. My target group were young adults, ages 20 – 30. I interviewed young men and women in the Rochester area, volunteers at Ground Zero, students in Poland, and church members in Hungary. The common thread was that they were all between 20 and 30 – some were students, others had started careers, some were married, others single – there was a variety of life experiences. I ask them to do a questionnaire and then have a conversation with me about their answers. One of the questions was "What challenges your spiritual life?" To my honest surprise, there was an answer that seemed to pop up over and over again on both sides of the ocean. Question: What challenges your spiritual life? Answer: I have too many choices in my life. In the conversation that followed, I ask them to speak more about this answer. I was intrigued with how they linked choices and spirituality. In Eastern Europe and in the US, the answer was the same "I don't know how to incorporate my faith into the process of making life choices." They expressed a desire to be authentic, but a confusion as to how to make that happen for themselves.

I think that dilemma does not simply belong to young adults. I think we all struggle with that question and it is, in fact, a “spiritual challenge”. God created us to be free thinking people. God gave us free will. We can run away from God – in little ways – in big ways – or we can choose to walk toward God. What can Jesus teach us about decision making?

..... which brings us back to the story of Jesus,' experience in the wilderness. He is at the beginning of his ministry having just stepped out of the Jordan River. He hardly knew what he was being called to do but he did know that God's vision was his vision. This story echoes the dilemma of Adam and Eve, the moans of Noah watching it rain for forty days and forty nights, as well as the bellyaching of the Israelites wandering forty years in the wilderness. In typical Matthew style, the story is grounded in Hebrew faith history while at the same time connects with people of faith in all time and places. Don't get me wrong, I don't think any of us has a little man in a red suit knocking at our door enticing us to wrong doing. That's too easy – for we could then blame our bad decisions on the man in the red suit – but I do believe that we are all faced with choices that can either nurture God's plan for humanity and or hinder itthat is the divine gift of free will. In Matthew, Jesus sent the devil running because he refused to be self-indulgent. He refused to satisfy his own needs, to uplift his own ego, and to increase his own power. Instead, he remained God's faithful humble servant.

With so many choices in front of us each and every day – what is the roadmap for making a faith based choice. Oh, if we could just type our starting and ending point into Faith Quest and a 1, 2, 3, 4 list of directions would pop upand personally I think the estimated time of arrival would be helpful. That is not the way life is, however. God beacons us to discover our own faith quest. God gave us Jesus to teach us the “how tos” and God's sent the Holy Spirit to strengthen us for the journey.

Jesus began his ministry upon returning from the wilderness – as we know, he continued to face temptations. Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Inspired by Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, Lent is the forty days excluding Sundays, before Easter. It offers us a time to look

within and discover, like Jesus, the divine power within ourselves that enables us to be faithful people of God. During Lent, I invite you to set aside a few minutes each day to evaluate, in the light of your faith, the choices you make:

Do they promote healthy relationships in your life?
Is God's creation, enhanced or damaged by them?
Are God's people uplifted or discouraged by them?
Do they serve selfish purposes or God's purposes?
Do they increase the peace?

Decide where changes need to happen. Create a plan and then pray for God's help. It could be as simple as committing to use environment friendly light bulbs or as complex as deciding to reconcile with an estranged family member. It could be as complicated as researching the ethical ramifications of your investments or as simple as volunteering one day at a soup kitchen. The process will help you stand in front of the empty tomb on Easter morning with a better understanding of the joy of new beginnings, a better understanding of new life. You will discover the wondrous love of God. Amen.