

“A Matter of Means”
Living Vertically in a Horizontal World

I have always chuckled at the response of a woman who turned 104. She was being interviewed about her perspective on life. “What’s the best thing about being 104?” came the inquiry. “The best thing about being 104,” she responded with typical clarity, “is no peer pressure.”

She is in a great minority. More choices are available to people today than at any other time in the history of the world. But what are we to choose? Who really is impacting our decisions? Is God truly a consideration in our choices? When life is dividing before us, what temptations do we face in making our decisions? There are so many horizontal influences in our lives, as followers of Christ how do we in reality let the vertical dimension of life be predominant?

Wrestling with some of the hard questions of life will guide us on our Lenten journey this year as we make our way through this forty day period to Easter. Why do we observe a season called Lent? Don’t bother looking for Lent in a Bible dictionary. It didn’t exist in New Testament days. As the initial rush of adrenaline passed, followers of Christ became rather ho-hum about their faith.

Rome was not immediately removed from power. The world did not come to an end. Jesus did not come back to rescue them. Believers got comfortable. They just blended back in. It was hard to pick them out from the culture at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested as often for championing the poor. They avoided standing out. They became more nice than holy. They lived more and more horizontally influenced.

So in time the church began to recognize the need for a season which encouraged a renewal of faith and commitment. There were hints in the Bible about how to do just that. Israel had spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Moses spent 40 days up on the mountain as God gave him the law. Elijah spent 40 days on the same mountain before hearing the still, small voice of God. And Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, between his baptism and his ministry, tested by the devil.

So, the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *lenten*, meaning “spring” as both a reference to the season before Easter and also as an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days were set aside for cleansing

one's perspective and for remembering what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.

That's why Lent begins always with the story of the temptation of Jesus. In each case Jesus is tempted with a slight perversion of a legitimate end. In each temptation Satan would have our Lord use means that would betray his mission and purpose for life. The story focuses on the goals of the Christian life which we sometimes allow to be distorted by the mindset and pressures of the society in which we live. It also encourages us to examine the *means* we use in striving toward life's goals, no matter how noble our goals might be.

The Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness, to its isolation, to its emptiness so that he might examine his heart. St. Augustine later wrote that our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee. He was pointing to an emptiness that waits to be filled. Living in a horizontal world, we are tempted to fill the hollowness with something. We may try to fill the emptiness with shopping, eating, blaming or even taking care of other people.

Advertisers attempt to seduce us into believing that they have the product which will really fill our deepest hungers. We might say that an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us. But Christian tradition suggests the God-shaped hole belongs to God alone. Lent is a season of opportunity to allow the God who always wills our wholeness to be the occupant of that space within us.

Jesus' wilderness journey forces us to ponder what we mean by the devil and, by implication, evil. Now, in a sophisticated congregation like this one, there may be some folk who think that they have never met the Devil. After hearing a sermon on the devil in one congregation, a worshipper commented, "Preacher, we never knew who the devil was until you came here."

In terms of other religions and some parts of Christian tradition, the devil is clearly portrayed. The Buddhist devil Mara has hands and feet wrapped in the coils of 100,000 serpents. Pazuzu is the lean devil of Assyria with great wings, a huge hook on his head and an ugly, evil grin on his face...

Whatever the description, in terms of Judaic-Christian tradition Satan in Hebrew means "the accuser" or "the adversary." And when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the word *diabolos*, hence our devil, was used for Satan. Whatever may be the differences or the similarities of stories that make reference to the Devil in religious traditions, we are all pondering the mysterious power of

evil and the tremendous need for courage and wisdom that will be required to do good.

The Devil is pictured in the Bible as a person because evil is experienced by us as an intensely personal power, just as God is personified in the Bible because love and goodness is experienced in an intensely personal way. The Devil is also given a separate existence in biblical thinking, not because evil arises outside of us, but because evil is experienced as something greater than us.

Fred Craddock suggests that we don't make this story a cartoon. He doesn't picture a being with a pitch-fork and red-tail hurling fastballs at Jesus. He suggests that if he were to draw a picture of this text, Jesus would be the only one in the scene; he would not be alone, but all we could see would be Jesus.

“Why don't you turn stones to bread?” That is reasonable. He is hungry. Why not? After all, Jesus has not yet worked a miracle, healed a sick person, or taught a lesson. “Give it a try! Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. The Scripture says God will protect you. You won't get hurt. It's in the Bible.”

“You know, it would make a lot of people believe! What's wrong with that? Isn't that the point after all? And just look at the kingdoms of the world. These are yours if...” We could all wish for more justice and fairness and equality in the world.

Jesus is approached and tested at the point of what is reasonable, what is helpful, and what is good. Did you ever consider the truth in this story that the greatest temptations are not about clearly doing something that is wrong? When Adam and Eve were approached by the tempter in the Garden they weren't asked if they wanted to live like the Devil. They were asked, “Would you like to be as God?” What is wrong with that? Isn't that what we are about?

At its deepest level, temptation is not about whether to eat chocolate or not. Jesus temptation was this: what am I going to do with my life? Real temptation is when you do not know right from wrong. It is not a matter of choosing the right and resisting the wrong. It is a matter of asking, what is God's will for me?

Last Wednesday night we had our Ash Wednesday service. It gets its meaning from “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” and it is a reflection of the brevity of life. It occurs to me each year, that even if we live to be 90 or 104, life is such a brief thing from birth to death. What are we going to do with the rest of my life? That's our task.

Have you decided that your life will have integrity and everything you say and do will grow out of that integrity? The marvelous thing about the gospel is that even if you have never thought about it, it is not too late. And even if you have messed everything up, it is not too late. Now, what do I do with my life? That is the meaning of Lent. That is the meaning of the gospel. That is the example of Jesus—to struggle with the will of God.

Our consciousness of this hollowness deep within us is not a sign of something gone wrong; rather, it is a mark of the holy of holies inside of us. Nothing but God can fill it. Temptation masquerades most cleverly in areas of moral ambiguity where good people can be tempted either to do good things for the wrong reason, or bad things for a good and high purpose. That is why goodness must be constantly addressed and challenged.

Stories have filled the news of a cult-type group in Lee's Summit which among other things sees taking medication or receiving medical treatment as evil. Putting ourselves in harm's way as a sign of trust in God is very misguided and we need to say so.

Putting our best efforts forward to research RTS because we know a little angel in our midst who might be served is acting with the compassion of Christ. I thank God that we are the kind of church that senses clearly the answer to the question: "To whom am I a neighbor?" The answer is to anyone whose need constitutes a claim on my mercy—anyone whose predicament demands from me a compassionate response...from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth. And such love changes our world.