

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Communion Sunday, March 1, 2020
First Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. David McKane

“Choices!”

Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7. Psalm 32. Romans 5: 12-19. Matthew 4: 1-11.

It is always wonderful in addition to being a privilege to be invited to preach but it is so much more wonderful to be invited back. It is good to be with you again on St. David's Day as we begin our journey through Lent. Lent is all about journeys, outward journeys as we explore the world around us and inner journeys as we explore our inner life and spiritual journeys as we follow Jesus. Today we begin such a journey.

Prayer.

Choices, we make dozens of them every day! Will that be with or without cream? Did you want butter with that? Caffeinated or decaffeinated? One or two? Is that left or right? When do we stand? Do I run the yellow light or hit the brakes hard and stop in the middle of the intersection? Does this tie go with this shirt? Salt or pepper? Did you want fries with that? Debit or visa? And those are the easy ones. Choices! Do we address climate change and make serious cuts to the oil industry or increase the price of carbon emissions? Do we vote for an education system that may increase our taxes or do we balance the budget at the expense of the most vulnerable? Do we hire more nurses and PSW's or do we outsource to private companies under the guise of protecting Public Health. Do we lessen the environmental measures to allow for more mining, clear cutting, water pollution and more jobs? Do we protest against the clear cutting of rain forests in Brazil, Columbia and Venezuela or do we place profits above the environment? Do we honour the right of public protest that shuts down major rail lines and major pipelines or do we recognize the need for consultations between opposing parties whether it is between the City Works Department and us as property owners or between the Federal Government and Canada's Indigenous people? These are complicated and tough choices.

Matthew has some choices to make. Writing 40 to 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Matthew tells us about the temptations that Jesus faces in the wilderness.

Douglas Hall, professor Emeritus of Theology at McGill says we miss the point when we consider this Gospel passage only from the perspective of Jesus. It is, Hall claims, a statement about the church and therefore about us. Jesus, of course, resists the temptations. We and the church are not so fortunate.

Matthew tells of three temptations, bread into stones, the dramatic spectacle of leaping off tall buildings and political power but Hall suggests that these are merely variations on a theme, a theme with which we are all too well accustomed, that of control, a temptation the church fell into in the 4thC when it became the State religion, and has never quite managed to resist, but then the desire for control and power is very human.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the writings of C.S. Lewis. Lewis was an English Professor at both Oxford and Cambridge in the thirties, forties and fifties of the last century. He wrote the **Tales of Narnia**, **Mere Christianity** and **Screwtape Letters** which he dedicated to his friend J.R.R. Tolkien of **The Lord of The Rings** fame. Perhaps you've read C.S. Lewis, perhaps even **Screwtape Letters**.

In **Screwtape Letters** Lewis writes of a junior tempter-in-training named Wormwood and his uncle mentor, Screwtape. Young Wormwood's task is to darken the heart of his "patient", as Lewis names the victim or target, and persuade the "patient" to reject God and trust himself so that Wormwood can escort him into Hell. Keep him spiritual, counsels Screwtape, keep him focused on himself, make him boastful of his own power. If Lewis had not written this book back in 1942 you would almost think he was a contemporary political journalist.

In his final letter the "patient" dies and goes to heaven leaving Wormwood a failure and Screwtape in a spiral of anger but the captivating attraction of Lewis's novel is not that Screwtape and Wormwood are trying to create an army of ruthless killers, like ISIS or Boca Haran or Hezbollah or the Taliban but rather a generation of people who are defined by selfishness, pride, and fear and a need to be in control which is largely true of our own temptations.

Lent invites us to look at, examine, explore the dark places of our lives, to come face to face with them, to name them and understand them and control them instead of them controlling us.

We long for a Christ of power, says the late theologian Paul Tillich, for a benevolent dictator to get us off the hook of the sheer hard work of saving ourselves or saving our planet. The problem with that is that we would lose our freedom, our humanity, our responsibility for our own choices. We often speak of the power of love but lovers know that love is power only when it assumes the utter vulnerability of the lover, like a child born in a manger or anywhere else for that matter. Whenever I am weak then I am strong writes another Paul to the Corinthians to which C.S. Lewis adds, "to love at all is to be vulnerable."

Over and over again throughout our lives we have to make choices. It is part of the price we pay for being human, for possessing freedom of choice and not all of our choices will be wise ones and not all of our choices will be altruistic. Some of them will be difficult and some of them will be life changing. Part of growing up, of our maturing is to understand that and understanding that to be able to forgive ourselves so that we can forgive others. Of course, it is always easier to forgive or excuse ourselves, a la Bea Arthur in Golden Girls, "the devil made me do it."

Jesus forty days has ended. With Lent our forty days have just begun, which presents us with another choice. We can simply get on with life and ignore it or we can use the next forty days to evaluate our lives, become aware of the choices we make as well as the ones we don't. But that's another choice for us to make!

Amen! And to God be the glory!