

Choose Wisely, Friends!
[Text -Matthew 3:13 - 4:11]

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At Jesus' baptism, he sees the Spirit of the Holy One descend upon him in the form of a dove, and he hears a Heavenly Voice declare: "You are my Beloved Child, with whom I am well pleased." It's a truly touching Trinitarian moment: The Creator, the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit all convening together on the glistening banks of the Jordan River. But then, we're told that Jesus is immediately "led by the Spirit into the *wilderness*, where he fasts for forty days, and is tempted by the *devil*." Now that's a pretty strange sequence of events: To be washed in the water of Baptism, touched by the Holy Spirit, warmly affirmed as a beloved Child of the Holy One; and then be led by that same Spirit into the wilderness for a time of testing by the Prince of Darkness.

It's almost like God is punking Jesus: getting him all psyched-up to serve as the Messiah - the Anointed One; and then leading him into the wilderness for a 40 day fast and a fierce struggle with Satan. But actually, it's *because* of this time "in the wilderness" that Jesus is able to fully claim his position, and his mission, as the Messiah [or in Greek, the Christ]. Apparently, before he can embark on his Messianic ministry, Jesus needs to decide what kind of Messiah [or Christ] he's going to be. And in a similar way, as you and I embark on our journey of faith, we also must decide what kind of Christians we are going to be.

I think most of us recognize there are two basic kinds of "Christians": those who emphasize Divine judgment, exclusion and wrath; and those who emphasize Divine compassion, unity and love. I believe that an individual will be drawn toward one position or the other, depending on how that person responds to that basic temptation that Jesus faces: Whether to surrender completely to Divine compassion and grace; or to give-in to the temptation of maintaining our own power and control.

One of the great values of the story of Jesus' temptation, is that it reminds us that the greatest temptation to those who seek to serve God, is the temptation of *power*. The tempter says to Jesus: 'If you are the Child of the Holy One, show your power and *command* this stone to become bread!

No? OK, then how about this: According to the Scriptures, God will always protect you. So, throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple, and survive unharmed! Such a display of power will have the people eating out of our hand; and you will have forced the hand of *God!* What, no good? Too flashy? Alright, then if you'll just give-in a little bit and work with me, I can *promise* you the power and glory of all the kingdoms of the world!'

Like a modern-day politician, the Great Tempter tries to get Jesus [and us] to compromise our principles, for the promise of some future, greater good. But Jesus responds with a resounding "No!" Jesus certainly has already seen plenty of political and religious leaders who are far more interested in gaining power and control over people's lives, than in actually helping them. He knows how power can tempt and corrupt even those who may begin with the best of intentions. So Jesus determines that he is not going to give-in to the temptation of power. Instead, he will humbly go about doing good, by performing acts of kindness, compassion, and service. And on those occasions when the crowds try to make him their champion and king, Jesus simply slips-away.

For Jesus, being a genuine Child of the Holy One means trusting *completely* that his life and the lives of all those around him, are ultimately in the loving and capable care of our One Divine Source. And it's this bedrock belief that empowers Jesus to live - and even to die - trusting that he, and we, are completely loved and affirmed by the Holy One. Knowing that his Heavenly Parent loves him with an unconditional, eternal love, Jesus can let-go of his own need for power or prestige, and take-on the role of a humble servant: One who can freely love and care, touch and heal, give and forgive.

And when the time finally comes to choose between facing death, or abandoning the Divine message of an all-inclusive love and grace, Jesus trusts once again in that never-ending, Divine Love. The Good News of our Faith, is that even when the forces of fear, hatred and death claim the life of Jesus, the greater power of Eternal Life and Love re-claim him - breaking the grip of death, and showing the way to meaningful and everlasting life for all of God's beloved daughters and sons.

Jesus, the Christ, reminds us that we don't have to give-in to the temptation of trying to control and protect our own lives, by controlling, running, or ruining the lives of others. Instead, we can trust completely that the limitless power of Divine Love will ultimately keep us safe and secure. And when you and I truly trust this, we will find the strength and courage to overcome all those other temptations that come our way. We will joyfully believe, claim, and proclaim the *Good News*: That we are *all* beloved children of our One Divine Source! And as sisters and brothers, we will treat one another with patience and kindness, openness and acceptance, respect and love. We will choose the way of compassion, peace, and unity - over the destructive path of power, domination, and divisiveness. In other words, we will faithfully follow the Way of Jesus Christ.