

CHOICES

Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matt. 4:1-11
First Sunday in Lent, a; March 13, 2011
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Prayer: Life-sustaining God, with us through all our trials and temptations, bear us up through this season of self-examination, that we might feed on the bread of your word, open ourselves to your presence without demanding proof and signs, and let go of all the idols that surround us to worship and serve you with joy and delight, through the grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a scene in Harry Potter, early in the first book in the series, when the young wizard enters Hogwarts School. He, along with all the first-year students, is placed by the Sorting Hat into one of four houses.

When it was Harry's turn to sit at the stool at the front of the Great Hall, and put on the Sorting Hat, the hat could not at first determine which house would best fit him. Gryffindor, known for its courage; Ravenclaw, known for its brilliant ones; Hufflepuff, known for its loyal ones; or Slytherin, the house of the Dark Power's cunning and wiles. All Harry could do was pray, "Not Slytherin, not Slytherin."

"Not Slytherin, eh?" Said the Sorting Hat. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that....no? Well, if you're sure—better be GRYFFINDOR!"¹

Later, Harry explains his puzzlement with the Headmaster, Dumbledore, about the Sorting Hat's uncertainty:

"Professor, the Sorting Hat told me I'd have done well in Slytherin."... "You would have," Dumbledore explained to him, "because you have some of the dark power in you." ... "So I should be in Slytherin," Harry said. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin power in me, and it...." "Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities [the founder of Slytherin] prized in his hand-picked students....resourcefulness, determination, a certain disregard for rules—yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was? Think." "It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin..."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."²

It is our choices that show what we truly are, indeed. In our texts today we are faced with two other young men faced with choices. One was in a garden, one was in the wilderness. Both choices had consequences far beyond anything they could have imagined.

There was the garden ... Ah! The garden. You know about the garden. Some of you were raised singing about the garden.

“I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses.
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses ...
And he walks with me and he talks with me ...”

The garden — lush, green foliage, teeming with life. An abundance of fruit for all. Creation lives in perfect balance in the garden. The roots of the trees go deep into the rich fertile soil. Every creature has a purpose and interacts with one another. There is rain, there is sunshine, there is shade in the heat of day. The garden is a place of comfort, a place of wholeness, a place of peace... where Jesus “walks with me and he talks with me.”

The garden is the place in which God created us to live. The garden provides all we need to live the way in which God wants us to live. “And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.”

And then there is the wilderness. There aren't any old time religion hymns about the wilderness. We aren't talking about the Great Smoky Mountains National Park lush green wilderness. No, this is desert. Lonely, dry. Rocky cliffs, huge precipices. Deep gouges. No vegetation. Eerie. Threatening. You feel like you are on the edge of chaos. No life. Food is scarce, if present at all. The wilderness is a place of alienation...of doubt... of anxiety.

It is far removed from the garden. There is no “joy to share as we tarry there” in the wilderness; and some would say, no God there either.

We have these two different images from our scriptures this morning, both as different as night and day. One would think, wouldn't one, that it would be the garden that would be more conducive to wisdom and faith. One can look around and see clearly the bountiful life. One would think that all would be content in the garden. There would be a sense of awe and wonder.

And one would think, wouldn't one, that the wilderness would be a place where rebellion would foment. Where there is little or no life, there might be little or no faith.

Yet that is not what we find in the Bible. It is in the garden where our first ancestors blew it. They might have stayed in the garden forever, but no. Their curiosity got the best of them. God gave them a multiple choice test and they flunked. God drew a line in the garden and said “Human beings on this side, God in this side. Tree of life on your side, tree of knowledge of good and evil on my side. Stay on your side if you know what's good for you.”

But they decided to trust their own logic over God's commands, and the next thing you knew they were looking for a new place to live. You would think that the garden would have been good enough, wouldn't you?

Yet in our second lesson the spirit takes another ancestor of ours, whom the Bible calls the Second Adam, whom we call Jesus, not to the garden, but to the wilderness. And there is another multiple choice test here, a line drawn in this story as clearly as there was in the first one. Jesus could play God or he could remain human. He could go buzzing around in the air turning the desert into a gourmet bakery or he could keep his feet on the ground and live with the ache in the pit of his stomach. But he refused to cross over the line.

Both were tempted to play God. Adam's temptation was to become independent of God; Jesus' temptation was to become superman, to feed every hunger, to control all the kingdoms of the earth.

There was a line in the garden and a line in the wilderness. There was a choice to be made in both. Adam stepped over the line in the garden and found humanity a curse. Jesus chose to stay behind the line in the wilderness and made humanity a blessing. One tried to be God; one was content to remain a human being. And it's hard to miss the irony: the one who tried to be God did not do too well as a human, but the one who was content to be human became known as the Son of God.³

So my question is this: Is God more real in the wilderness than in the garden? Is God more real to one stumbling and sobbing through the valley of the shadow than to one skipping across the peaks of opulence and success? Is it true? I don't know; I'm just asking. I know that I've been through a few wildernesses in my life, and most of you have too. Is it true that God's word of truth sounds more clearly, more convincing in the wilderness? At least there is some evidence in my life, and maybe yours too, to suggest so.

You've heard the saying "No sailor ever distinguished himself in a calm sea."

And the poet Browning wrote words that sound more trite than they truly are, on reflection:

I walked a mile with Pleasure
She chattered all the way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow
And nary a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When sorrow walked with me.

Our wilderness, of course, yours and mine, our wilderness is not one of geography and climate, not the desert waste between Babylonia and Palestine. Our wilderness is spiritual, moral, political, economic, social, racial, ecclesiastical. Our wilderness is personal and interpersonal. Our wilderness is theological. Our wilderness is any place where we reflect on and wrestle with the meaning of those voices that speak to us of faith and of duty, of virtue, of pain and suffering, of despair and doubt and promise.

Wilderness. What do you see when I say that word? I see a couple waiting expectantly for a child. They have the nursery ready, everything all set. And the doctor walks in, and he's not smiling. Wilderness.

An older man, recently widowed, just can't seem to enter the church again. After all, they sat there in the same pew for nearly 50 years. Wilderness.

The woman did her very best to keep things together. After all, there are the children. But then one night, the husband comes home and says, "That's it." Wilderness.

The young woman goes off to college. Had always gone to both Sunday school and church. And then she hears the professor questioning some things in the Bible that should be beyond questioning. And all of a sudden one card of faith is removed and the whole stack collapses. Wilderness.

The young man has gone to church all his life. Been as faithful as they come. But he feels the doors of the church closing in on him. And now he's on the outside. And to rub salt into the wound, some like it that way. Wilderness.

A family has lived frugally and saved for their retirement. Just a few months away now. Then the company collapses, the money is gone, and stories begin circulating about how top executives cashed in early. And then they turn on the television and see the wife of a top executive crying over the fact that they've had to sell one of their homes in Aspen. They only have four homes left. "We're struggling for liquidity," she cries. And the older couple just sits there, saying nothing. Wilderness.

Have you ever been through the wilderness? It's my guess, no, it's my knowledge that some of you are in the wilderness right now. We don't choose to go through the wilderness, and I for one, don't know why some of us spend so much time in wandering around our wildernesses. I don't think Jesus knew either. Else, why on the worst day of his life did he too, like every wilderness wanderer question "Why?" I just know that we do. But I do know that it is true that if we give any weight to the witness of those who have survived the wilderness, it is true that the words and wisdom that come to us in the wilderness are invaluable.

I also don't know why we aren't content with the garden; of why, when we have all we need, we want more, more, more. I only know that it's a truth, from my experience and yours, and scripture. And that's why we need Lent. It is a season for reflection. A wilderness time. A time to retreat and consider just who we are and whose we are. And a time to make a choice.

It is our choices that show what we truly are, indeed. Adam had a choice, and he was in the garden. Had everything going for him. And his choice became a curse for humanity.

And Jesus had a choice, there in the wilderness. But, like us, his choices never ended. He faced battle after battle with demons that fought him, religious leaders who entrapped him, disciples who misunderstood him, and even with himself, as he longed for a way to avoid the bitter cup of death. Who we are, and what we want — our true identity — is constantly being tested, it is what it means to be human. And his choice became a blessing for us all.

We do not know when our testing will come. It may come in the garden, in which case we must beware. The luxury of the garden can distort things. Or we may be thrust into the wilderness to go *mano a mano* with evil any time. But we can be ready. We can be ready with the strength of one prepared for battle, prepared for the choices we will inevitably make.

We all long for the garden. But for some reason unknown to us, we need the wilderness, for that is where honesty reigns. That is where we know our need. That is where God carries us.

And that is where we make choices. “It is our choices,” said Dumbledore, “that show what we truly are.” May we choose wisely then in this season of spiritual discernment, remembering who we really are — the beloved, fully human, children of God.

Amen.

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¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, (London: Bloomsburg Publishing, 1997), p. 88.

² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, (New York: Scholarship Press, 1998), p. 333.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Remaining Human, *The Christian Century*, Feb. 7, 1996, p. 127.