

*Readings*

Dt 26:4-10

Rom 10:8-13

Ps 91:1-2, 10-15

Lk 4:1-13

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As I contemplate the life of Jesus Christ, I often wonder, “What was he doing and how was he living before he began his public ministry?” Preceding Luke’s account today, we heard of his nativity, his adolescent adventure in the Temple, and his baptism. His ministry commenced around the age of 30. So we can reasonably assume that he was living in Nazareth, working to provide for his family, an observant and faithful Jewish man, during those years. Following Luke’s narrative of the preaching of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus, we have this description of his odyssey in the desert. What I wonder is, what might he have been thinking in the desert?

Luke tells us that the devil departed from him...for a time, which insinuates that there would be more challenges ahead. He went into the desert after his baptism, then began his ministry and, similar to his ancestors who wandered in the desert after the Exodus, saw a challenging path before him. Aware of the preaching of John the Baptist and the consequences for him, it’s quite possible that he was weighing whether to continue life as he knew it or take a significantly different path. Until this time he had never lived anywhere but Nazareth. He was poor and life was hard, as it was for most of his people. The life to which he was accustomed was sedentary and familiar. To make this extraordinary change and begin an itinerant enterprise

among the various communities along the Sea of Galilee took some daring. Going into the desert, reflecting on what he heard from John's preaching, it's quite possible that he began to question his options. Should he stay in Nazareth, where life was predictable, or embark on a journey, led by the Spirit, fraught with uncertainties?

In his world, as in ours, society was divided. Some were strongly committed to violence in opposing Rome, while others chose to collaborate with them to avoid conflict – peace at any price. Neither option embraced John's words of reform and repentance, an unmistakable call for change and for people to transform their way of thinking. Jesus saw the need to take up the same mission, calling for repentance and renewed faithfulness to the covenant, aware of what John suffered. It took courage for him to move in a new direction, against an ostensible tidal wave of problems. His time in the desert, then, must have been a time to reflect on whether it was worth it. This wouldn't be the only time that he was tempted, as Luke implies, but it was evidently the first. We can only guess how many other times during his ministry, for instance when he went off to pray, that he considered abandoning this struggle in favor of his own comfort.

One of our revered Augustinians, Fr. Bill Atkinson, was once asked by his students, "Father, when did you decide to become a priest?" His answer surprised them; they probably expected some grandiose description of a profound, religious experience. "This morning," he said. Bill was noted for his brevity and getting to the point. The meaning is clear. Every day presents us with the option of choosing to persevere or to abandon the quest to be faithful, the temptation to continue the quest or forsake it.

The season of Lent is for us a desert experience during which we review and evaluate what we believe. We ask the same question every day in the choices confronting us. Although we

may not use these very words, it really does come down to our asking ourselves, “Is it worth it today to stand up for Gospel values in a world torn by strife and hatred?” Dealing with personal problems like disease, loss of employment, family troubles, as well as with the wider anxieties of economic, political and ecological troubles, can be frightening. And like Jesus, we may be tempted to ask ourselves how we can manage to deal with them. After all, what can I do to make any difference against these enormous problems?

One of the first things Jesus did upon emerging from the desert was to call others to follow him, to journey with him on this quest for reform and repentance. This is the nature of the Church. We are pilgrims on the journey, St. Augustine says, one in mind and heart on the way to God. We enter into this together, propelled by the Spirit who energized the early Church community to hang in there through their own tough times of persecution and trials. People of faith always look to God for guidance and trust that it will be given through the Holy Spirit. This is a critical time in the Church and in our world, in which those committed to Christianity are challenged to voice their opinions about how we can reform our lives and bring the Church into focus, to make the Church meaningful in our society, and to be instruments of effecting good in our world. It takes courage and conviction and above all, effort. As Jesus was tempted to disregard these challenges, so are we. But as we begin this season of Lent, let us follow his example and embrace them as opportunities for growth. With the help of the Spirit, may we be strengthened to stay the course, together with our sisters and brothers in the Church, as people of hope, working for justice.