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## *The Road Not Taken*

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Matthew 4:1-11

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Today is the first Sunday in the Lenten season. The classical spiritual discipline for this season of course is to practice penitence by giving up something we value. We do this so that when we feel the loss of things we enjoy, like red meat or chocolate, we will be reminded of our need to keep selfish desires in check and turn our hearts over to God and our neighbors.

This spiritual discipline tends to get lost in translation sometimes. I chuckled a little bit this week at a billboard encouraging people to observe Lent by visiting the all-you-can-eat seafood buffet of a local restaurant. Such travesties lead some of us to repeat the tired old joke about giving up Lent for Lent this year.

Today we are confronted with a story about what Jesus gives up for Lent. Each year, at the start of our forty-day journey toward Holy Week, the church commends to our attention this strange report about Jesus' own forty-day struggle with temptation as the Spirit drives him into the wilderness following his baptism.

It isn't necessarily a tale with a happy ending. A character in one of Dostoevsky's novels\* offers a scathing indictment of Jesus' choices as he wrestles with that spirit in the wilderness.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Think about that for a moment. What would have been the result if Jesus had used his divine power in a consistent way to produce food where previously there had been none. Jesus had it in his power to solve the problem of world hunger and the problem of faith in a single stroke. If he had been willing to turn stones into bread wherever it was needed, the countless multitudes of hungry children could find relief from their suffering, and the whole world would have come flocking to him, giving honor to one who brings divine power to bear in providing for their most obvious need. Yet Jesus chooses not to take that road. He turns away from this possibility and gives rise to a history in which untold future generations will suffer want. Why?

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the pinnacle of the Temple.]" Let everyone see in plain sight how the angels will bear you up and spare your life. Here again Jesus confronts the possibility of using his divine power to remove all the obstacles to faith. He is the Son of God. It is within his ability to produce on demand impressive displays of divine power sufficient to overcome the doubts of even the most hardened skeptics. Think how much blood has been spilled in human history as the result of one people trying to impose their own religious

beliefs on everyone else. And here Jesus has it within his grasp to avert all this tragedy and slaughter by using his divine power in such a way as to remove all ambiguity from questions of faith. Yet Jesus chooses not to take that road. He turns away from this possibility and leaves future generations facing the horrors of a human history steeped in religious conflict. Why?

Finally the tempter showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them and said to him, "All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me." Think of what kind of world this would be if Jesus himself reigned triumphant as the undisputed ruler and head of every land and nation and people around the globe. From the dawn of human history people have dreamed about a world that was unified and at peace. And Jesus being the Son of God has it within his grasp to use his divine power to bring that world into being. Yet Jesus chooses not to take that road. He turns away from this possibility and ensures that human history will continue to be a story of war and slaughter as competing empires and dominions clash with one another in the fight for global supremacy. Why?

World peace, religious unity, and victory over hunger--these are the things Jesus gives up for Lent. This is the road not taken as he faces the tempter in the wilderness. What is the path he chooses instead?

Jesus chooses instead that other forty-day journey which we reflect on this Lenten season, the road that leads to Jerusalem where he will be despised and rejected, betrayed and abandoned, nailed to a cross and left to die. How on earth do we make sense of this, good Christians, this tragic and incomprehensible set of choices which Jesus makes out there in the wilderness? He could have been universally adored, celebrated, glorified and the world could have been a vastly different place. And instead he leaves that comfortable, happy road behind, he sets aside all his divine power, and walks that other road which leads to Jerusalem and a cross of anguish. Why would he do it? What is to be gained by it?

What he gains by making the choices he does, as nearly as I can tell, is our dignity, our freedom, and our hearts. Jesus makes the choices in for us to have the possibility of freely choosing to love him. You see, Jesus in his glory is like a rich man. He possesses all the fullness of divine glory. And that is a position that puts love out of reach.

Think about it in terms of a human analogy: Imagine you are Donald Trump looking for true love. Everybody knows you are a very wealthy man. All your fabulous riches attract would-be lovers by the busload. But hanging like a dark cloud over the whole scene is the suspicion that they are really driven by an interest in your money. You can never really be sure that their interest in you is genuine, and neither, I suspect, can they.

This happy, contented road not taken which Jesus leaves behind is similar to that. If Jesus comes bearing bread and miracles and political authority, the whole world would flock to him out of simple self-interest. We would all celebrate him for reasons having little to do with love. We would cling to him for the sake of the benefits he could provide us. Which means our ultimate loyalty would be to the goodies rather than to Christ, and in that the devil would have his victory.

Let that sink into your hearts and minds, brothers and sisters. God doesn't want us to be puppets or well-trained pets. So much does Jesus value your personal dignity and freedom, so much does he want genuine love to be the bond that connects you to him, that he gives up all his

own glory, lays aside his divine prerogatives, forfeits every form of power or coercion or enticement. He even sets aside a world history of tranquility and plenty. He does all this and turns his face toward Jerusalem, all for the sake of his relationship with you. That is how much he loves... you! That is how valuable your love and your freedom and your dignity are to the King of the whole universe. And when we come to realize how valuable our dignity and freedom are to God, how could we not come to respect and value and defend the freedom and rights and dignity of our neighbors?

Do Jesus' choices really make sense? Could our ability to love freely really be that important? Paul considers all the admirable, self-sacrificing, spiritual and worldly alternatives to love that we might put front and center in our lives, and he concludes that without self-giving love, we have nothing. Listen to what he says:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.<sup>†</sup>*

I don't know. As our time on this earth draws to a close and we look back over our lives, what do you suppose will be our focal point? What will we look back on as having made it all worthwhile? Will we think about all the wonderful possessions we had, the cool gadgets, and say to ourselves, "There! That's what made me a worthwhile person, was having all that stuff!"? Will we linger over fond memories of the power and authority we were able to wield, the control we exercised, the respect we commanded? Will we spend lots of time rehearsing the beliefs we espoused or the positions we took on various important issues of the days gone by?

Don't you think that far more significant than any of these will be the knowledge of how much we have loved, and how deeply? Maybe love really is the most important thing.

Jesus gives up divine glory and a whole world in order to walk that dark path to Cavalry. And he does it so that when your life's path leads you into the valley of the shadow you will not walk that fearful path alone.

So often when life turns bitter for us we find ourselves looking upward, wishing for that powerful divine hand to reach down from on high bearing gifts of magical heavenly comfort. The miracle of the Gospel is to discover that in times when we are in that terrible, dark place, we find that the loving hand reaching out to us comes not from up above but from right alongside us in the darkness. Jesus does not want to be our rescuer, he wants to be our brother and companion and friend. That's what we gain when Jesus leaves his divine glory behind on that road not taken, and instead walks that dark road to Jerusalem alongside us.

Perhaps the spiritual project this Lenten season for those of us who declare ourselves his followers is to learn again what it means to walk as he walked, to make the kind of choices he made, and to be toward one another the way he has been toward us.

Perhaps we, too, can ask God to lead us away from those roads where we are tempted to undermine another person's dignity or manipulate their freedom with either power or coercion or bribes. Maybe our relations with others can start to glow with the light of our recognition that love really is the most important thing. Maybe we can ask God to break us free from our airless fixation

on worldly power and thrills and possessions, so that the fires of divine love can rekindle in our hearts. Is it possible that reflecting on Jesus' own choices can begin to reconnect us with just how valuable we are in God's eyes? People who know they are valued also come to see the value in their neighbors.

Can Jesus really help us to loosen our death-grip on personal possessions and prestige and power, and once again make love the most important thing, the only thing?

Jesus can do all this for us my brothers and sisters, and he will if we ask him. He gave up a whole world to make it possible.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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\*The Grand Inquisitor, in Bk. V ch. 5 of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

† 1 Cor 13:1-3