From Wilderness to Resurrection Hope

Reflection for the First Sunday in Lent: The Choices We Make

EMBRACE the Middle East

Readings: Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7, Romans 5.12-19, Matthew 4.1-11

As we begin this season of Lent, I'm standing here on the Mount of Temptation overlooking the ancient city of Jericho. The wilderness stretches out in front of me; harsh, exposed, full of sharp edges and shifting light. It's a landscape that makes you feel small. And yet, it's also a landscape where the deepest work of the soul can often take place. Today I will be reflecting on three bible readings, from Genesis, Mathhew's Gospel and the Letter to the Romans. You may want to pause the video and look these up before continuing.

It was in terrain like this that Jesus made the choices that would shape his ministry. It was here that he set out his stall. This wilderness is in sharp contrast to the beautiful garden described in the book of Gensis

The story of the Garden of Eden portrays a very different landscape; lush, green, abundant. A garden planted by God and filled with every good thing. And in its centre, a tree, and the possibility of a choice.

Adam and Eve's decision is not simply a story about forbidden fruit. It's a story about trust. God offered them life-giving abundance but the opportunity to trust in their own instincts was too hard to resist. The tragedy of the story of Eden is not that humanity made a mistake.

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It's that in that moment, we turned away from relationship, imagining we could define good and evil without reference to God. It's a story that plays out again and again in our world. Our choices shape us, for good or for ill.

And so we come to Jesus in the wilderness, hungry, vulnerable, and utterly exposed. The Gospel reading from Matthew brings us right here, to this place where the stones seem to shimmer in the heat. After forty days of fasting, Jesus faces three temptations. Three choices. The first choice to turn stones into bread is not just about hunger. It's about using power for personal comfort rather than for the good of others.

The second choice is to test God, to force God's hand, to demand spectacle rather than quiet faithfulness. It's a temptation that as we will later in Holy Week, Judas fell into and it's one that millions of us across the world fall into every time we respond to gimmicks and the cult of personality from both our politicians and celebrities. Jesus resisted the temptation to become a crowd pleaser.

The third choice Jesus is faced with is to compromise his integrity in exchange for power. How often do we take the apparently easier route to give ourselves the illusion of control and influence? In all three temptations, Jesus refuses shortcuts. He chooses the long, hard road of trust.

continued

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Lent 1: The Choices We Make (continued)

> **Every choice we make either builds or diminishes the possibility of flourishing for someone else. At Embrace the Middle East, we work every day with Christian partners across this region who are choosing hope, choosing compassion, choosing to serve their neighbours in the name of Christ, and we are invited to choose to stand with them.**

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, draws the threads of the choices of Eden and the Wilderness together: "Through one man came sin and death. Through one man came righteousness and life."

Paul is not giving us a comparison but a contrast. Where Adam and Eve's choice fractured humanity, Jesus' choices restore it. Where one choice led to brokenness, another choice leads to healing. And so the question quietly emerges, what choices will we make?

Standing here on the Mount of Temptation, I'm struck by how the wilderness strips things back. Here, there's nowhere to hide. Here, the noise falls away. Here, we see ourselves more clearly. Lent is our wilderness space. A time to pause, to examine our choices, and to let the Spirit speak. And we know that choices matter, not just personally, but collectively. The choices we make as communities, as churches, as nations, shape the lives of people in very real ways.

For many across the Middle East today, especially in places scarred by conflict, occupation, displacement, and poverty, choices are limited, sometimes painfully so. But we have choices. We can choose to listen or to look away. To stand with those seeking justice and peace, or to remain silent. To act with compassion, or to retreat into comfort.

Every choice we make either builds or diminishes the possibility of flourishing for someone else. At Embrace the Middle East, we work every day with Christian partners across this region who are choosing hope, choosing compassion, choosing to serve their neighbours in the name of Christ, and we are invited to choose to stand with them.

So as we enter this holy season, from this mountain where Jesus chose faithfulness over power, integrity over dominion, sacrifice over self-preservation, we are invited to reflect on the choices before us. On behalf of Embrace the Middle East I want to invite you to make a choice to join us this Lent in Acts of Hope. Acts that will encourage us to learn, listen, pray, act and watch for the signs of God's kingdom

These choices matter. They shape the world God longs for. They allow us to participate in Christ's healing work.

As we journey deeper into Lent, let's walk the path Jesus walked rooted in trust, guided by love, and committed to choosing life.

Amen.