Sunday, March 4, 2001
FINDING YOUR PURPOSE
Luke 4:1-13

All of us face choices in life. Some are inconsequential, meaning that no matter what you decide, it doesn't make much difference. Should you have Wheaties or cornflakes for breakfast? Are you going to wear your dark blue dress or your black dress, your gold earrings or your silver ones?

Other choices in life are more difficult. Should I tell my grandmother she has cancer, or because she is feeling so good and has no obvious symptoms, maybe it's best not to tell her, at least for the time being, so she has more time to enjoy without worry?

One of the most formidable questions most human beings have to deal with is: What am I going to do with my life? If you are a person with faith in God, you might ask the question this way: What purpose does God have for me, or what is God calling me to do with my life?

I have always envied people who seem to know exactly what God has in mind for them. Answers to questions on admissions applications to seminaries give some remarkable examples. One of the standard questions is: "Why do you want to become a minister?"

Some of the answers are amazing, many involving car accidents in which the applicant's narrow escape resulted in a call to become a minister. Back in the 16th century, Martin Luther narrowly missed being struck by lightning in a thunderstorm, and he interpreted this as God's call for him to become a priest.

Here are some other answers to this question from seminary applications. One man enclosed a photo of himself as a child evangelist, all decked out in a white suit with spit-combed blond hair. Someone else had a vision in which Jesus reached out and took her by the hand. But one of the best was from a man who had been convicted of armed robbery and became a Christian while serving his sentence. Along the way, he gained a reputation as a jailhouse preacher, whom a local church adopted and pledged to send to school. If the seminary would let him in, he said, then the parole board would let him out.

In the course of the interview, he told the admissions committee about his crime. It took place at a convenience store. He was just a stupid kid, he said, who had almost changed his mind when a police officer came into the store and saw what was going on. Everyone panicked. It had been years ago, but he clearly still relished telling the story. Sitting at the table with the admissions committee members, he pulled up his shirt to show them where the bullet had gone into his belly and out his back. That was his "burning bush" experience, he claimed, with a big grin on his face.

We don't know for sure from the Bible stories exactly when and how Jesus experienced God's call to his special kind of ministry. Maybe his mother Mary told him the stories of his remarkable birth. Later, when he was 12 years old and went to Jerusalem and spent time in the temple, he began to get a sense of it. And later, when he was baptized by John the Baptist, he gained more information about his purpose in life.

But he still had questions. How was he to carry out this ministry? Even when you are convinced you know your overall purpose in life, there are still temptations, with lots of choices

to be made, and some of them are very perplexing. As Jesus discovered, the really complicated decisions in life are not between what we know to be good or evil, but those choices that seem to pit one good against another good. That's what he faced as he was about to begin his ministry. He was wrestling with what the will of God was for him. In trying to determine this, he was faced with three very attractive possibilities. All three had immense potential for the good.

The first, "Turn these stones into bread." In a world of many hungry people, in addition to the fact that he was very hungry himself, why not feed them? All around him, people were starving. How could he preach good news to the poor if they were hungry? Wouldn't it be difficult to say to a group of very hungry people, "I am the bread of life, those who come to me shall never hunger," and not feed them food for their stomachs as well as food for their spirits?

The tempter said, "Take care of their physical needs first, and then they will follow you." On the other hand, they would probably be following him for the wrong reasons, and once he quit providing for their physical needs, they would desert him. Furthermore, was he feeding them to draw more attention to himself, to build his fame, or was he feeding them out of compassion?

Deep down, Jesus knew that food to satisfy physical hunger is never enough. We do not live by bread alone. It can also create an unhealthy dependency. We've all heard the old saying, "Give a hungry person a fish, and they will have food for a day. Teach a hungry person to fish, and they will eat for a lifetime."

Jesus knew the Old Testament stories of his people. He remembered that when the Israelites were in the wilderness after leaving slavery in Egypt, it was shortly after they were filled with manna from God that they rebelled against God. Handouts, even out of compassion, do not produce loyal, committed, long-term followers. However, this does not excuse us from finding creative ways to feed the hungry. Handouts are frequently necessary, but they should not be done to gain power or draw attention to yourself.

"Turn these stones into bread," was an attractive temptation, especially when combined with the temptation of doubt. Was he truly God's chosen one? Was he absolutely sure that was his purpose in life? Note that the tempter prefaced this first temptation with the teasing question, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." Jesus no doubt thought for at least a moment, "Maybe I should test my powers to see if I am really God's chosen one?"

This first tough choice in finding his purpose was personal and social. The second was political. Should he try to become a powerful political leader in order to achieve good for the people of this world? In a world of slavery, war, hunger, and injustice, why not?

Lest you misunderstand, this is not to say that going into politics is always a bad choice. For many, it can be the right choice. It can be God's purpose for you. It is a high calling. We need more qualified and dedicated people to enter public life.

The temptation is to believe that there is a political solution to every problem. We face that temptation especially today. Got a social problem? Pass a law. Got an economic problem? Pass a law, appropriate some money, or elect a leader who promises to solve all those problems because the solutions are not that complicated. Is crime a problem? Build more prisons. Pronounce harsher sentences. Increase capital punishment. Are drugs a problem? Put more people in prison for longer terms. We love simple solutions, especially those that demonstrate our power, even when studies show they aren't working.

The third temptation in finding and fulfilling his purpose was religious. Jump off the temple from its highest point and see if God will save you at the last minute. Do something dramatic to prove to people that you are truly God's Messiah by showing them that God will protect you. What a crowd-pleaser! Who could doubt that you are the Messiah if you jumped off the pinnacle of the temple and right before you hit the ground, a cluster of angels came out of nowhere to catch you just before you hit the ground? People love drama, sensation, and magic. But do these dramatic events produce committed, loyal followers?

This third choice was also very attractive because if God didn't protect him in his jump, if he lived, he could always blame God for the failure. It would be God's fault, not his. It's a continuing temptation for us to want to blame God, the devil, or someone else for our bad choices or moral failures and thereby avoid personal responsibility.

These three temptations were especially perplexing because each one seemed to pit one good against another.

What, then, are some of the lessons we can learn from these difficult choices which Jesus faced as we try to find and fulfill our true purpose in life?

First, this story tells us that being committed to following the will of God in your daily life does not exempt you from facing tough decisions and alluring temptations. The story says that Jesus "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." The story is not saying that he was tempted because he had departed from trying to find God's purpose for his life. On the contrary, he was tempted because he was in the process of trying to determine what God's purpose was for his life and ministry, and especially what means he would use to carry out that purpose.

The more you are concerned with discovering and fulfilling God's purpose for your life, the more tough choices you will face.

Second, we learn from this story that facing demanding choices is a sign of strength, not weakness. We are usually tempted to do that which is within our capacity. Thus, the greater the capacities, the greater the temptations.

For example, if someone has great talent for leadership and a gift for public speaking, they will face some tempting choices in how these gifts are to be used.

The fierceness of the desert struggle is a testimony to Jesus' power and his being called to a high purpose. The tempter does not waste time on weaklings or on people who are not concerned with their purpose or who have no purpose. It is the very good who are tempted the most and who face the most complicated choices, not the borderline good.

I repeat, what this story tells us is that the most complicated choices you will face are not likely to be in a situation where there is a clear choice between good and evil. For example, I'm sure that no one listening to this sermon has ever been tempted to commit armed robbery. But there are situations that involve small and large sums of money where choices have to be made, and the ethical issues are not completely clear. Those who put together complicated financial deals and who have good intentions have to be careful that the desire for a quick profit does not compromise their ethical standards.

Remember this also: if you think of yourself as a good person (and I hope you do), with a deep core of ethical standards, and want to stand up to the tough choices, that does not mean you will have fewer difficult decisions to make than others, but quite the opposite. Those who want to be true to their purpose and their ethical principles are apt to agonize over ethical decisions that other people drifting over the surface of life might never even see as temptations.

I believe this story of Jesus facing temptations tells you that you will face many alluring temptations as you go about finding and fulfilling God's purpose for your life. Perhaps the biggest temptation of all is to put off finding and fulfilling your purpose. I meet people all the time who tell me they are waiting to find out what their true purpose is, or else they are waiting until circumstances improve enough for them to do a better job of fulfilling it. Until then, one thing is for sure: this is not it — this present life, under these present circumstances — this cannot possibly be what God had in mind.

This is sad because it can be an excuse to postpone full immersion in this life. You can tell yourself, if this life is not yet my real life, then why give it all I have? You can live like a young child where no one expects much of you. That way you can keep dismissing what you do every day, keep discounting who you are, because it does not match your fantasy of what you could be if only you had the perfect situation. You can also then avoid the kind of difficult choices that Jesus had to make as to how you are going to fulfill your true purpose.

The truth is, as this Bible story illustrates, the life God is calling you to is the one you are living right here, right now, under these present circumstances. You are to bloom each day where you are planted. You are to make the tough decisions here and now. Sure, in the future you might be planted somewhere else, and then you are to bloom there too. Whether you are a sophomore trying to decide on a major or a professional at the top of your profession, you have choices to make every day.

You have what each one of us has: one whole life to live on this earth, with tasks in it that you can choose to do well or poorly, and with people in your life that you can lift up by your presence with them or put down by your absence from them, even though you are standing right in front of them.

Every night when you go to sleep, there is either more life in the world because of you, or there is less life in the world because of you. This remains true whether or not you have ever seen a burning bush or had a special vision from God in some other way. Your purpose and mine is to live fully in the life we have now.

Who knows? Maybe God really does have something else in mind for you, something quite grand. But if you won't live this life to the full and face the tough temptations, big and small, every day here and now, then why should God think up something more challenging for you? Amen.