

The problem with this story about Jesus being tempted by the devil is that there is no anxiety. We could be hearing about paint dry here. I don't know about you, but when I'm faced with serious choice points in my career, in my relationships, in my leadership not just here but daily, as I live my life, I experience anxiety. I experience sleepless nights. I constantly talk to myself. Try as I might to push them away, the choices before me are never far from my thinking...when I wake up in the morning, when I lie down at night, in the shower, in the Board meeting, in my conversations with my kids or my wife. It's with me all the time. Sometimes the choices before me affect my whole biology – and all my functions, don't function. Maybe that's also true for you.

Here we have Jesus, early, early in his ministry, discerning his sense of call and figuring out his priorities. He's done what leaders throughout Jewish history have done; they've gone into a time of what feels like wilderness wandering. For forty days he didn't eat. Hint here, when you hear the number 40 in the bible, forty days, forty years...it's biblical code...meaning a long time. These 40 days or years are typically a time of confusion and obscurity. And I believe at this time in his life, he was anything but clear about his call, his priorities or himself.

But the story is bland. In Matthew's telling of the events, the words are tepid. The story is devoid of any emotional content. We could well be reading the McDonald's menu.

The devil, Satan, has been sent by the Spirit. Friends, here is the biblical understanding of the word Satan. Satan, the devil, comes from the Greek word diabolos – dia means to through or across, and bolos to throw. Literally, in biblical times the devil was messenger sent by God (all things were made by God) to cross our path. We're the one who make it evil friends. All the messenger is doing is giving Jesus another perspective as he considers his own call, his own leadership, his own ethics.

Look what's happening. Jesus is kind of hungry after fasting for this long. The messenger crossing Jesus' path says, "Hungry? If you are the son of God, shouldn't you be able to turn these stones into loaves of bread." Think of it. Jesus is about justice and the breaking of empire, feeding the hungry, clothing the poor. How quickly that problem could be solved if he used the power clearly the messenger thought he had by simply turning the stones to bread. This was a new perspective on the desire to feed the hungry. This was a good choice. Doing it God's way is going to take a really long time.

This way is fast, and Jesus can worry about all the other ministry problems he faces. This is a serious option worthy of consideration.

Likewise, the messenger invites Jesus to really trust his own devices in times of danger; to embrace his humanity when his life is in peril. "If you're the son of God, throw yourself off this building, the angels will protect you." This option really touches my own experience. Even though I'm in danger here, all I have to do is work harder, longer hours, study more...the salvation of the church depends on me. I think our whole society is lured by this very real option, particularly men. We learn this at an early age. Go it alone. Win at all costs. The only one you can count on is you. I wonder if anyone else is hooked by this message from this messenger.

The final temptation in this little story skewers the church. The messenger takes Jesus to a high pinnacle, where he can see vast distances; he can see all the kingdoms of the world. What happens when you get that far up? The boundaries and the borders disappear. We see one united land and people. Could there be anything more perfect for the church triumphant? It's a viable option for Jesus. It's another way of stepping into leadership that might expedite unity, peace, justice.

This is what it means to be human friends. We're faced with a truth that kind of smells sometimes. Sometimes, we try to convince ourselves, the end justifies the means. Just this week, we heard the news story about marine biologists in Vancouver having to kill six sea turtles for research, in order to stabilize the world's population of sea turtles – turtles that are in danger of extinction. Now there's a dilemma. See what I mean about reading this story like it's a McDonald's menu. These are very real plausible viable human options...crossing Jesus' path. I'd be anxious. I think anyone would be.

For those of you who don't know, I was the marketing director for the Alberta Ballet Company in the early 80's, a job I used to describe as my all time favourite job. I would wager that the most coveted role for any prima ballerina in any dance company in the world is that of the Black Swan from Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. (Let me show you the coda from the Black Swan pas de deux from the second act of Swan Lake.)

The role takes raw talent, a sensitive musicality, flawless ballet technique and stamina and strength. This role is not for beginners. If I'd had my wits about me on the weekend, I would have rooted out my photographs of Alberta Ballet's principal dancer, Mariane Beausejour performing the role at the Banff Festival of the Arts. Mariane was that kind of dancer. There was no male dancer in the company strong enough to partner with Mariane when she learned it, so she danced with a Fernando Jhones from the National Ballet of Cuba.

The story of Swan Lake is a love story between a prince and a princess. A jealous sorcerer king turns the princess into a swan queen, only to be released when she finds true love. Try as she might, the white swan queen can not break the spell because the prince is lured by her evil twin sister, the Black Swan. In the end, the prince falls for the Black Swan, and the swan queen is released from the spell only when she kills herself. It's great stuff and the Tchaikovsky score is magnificent. It's the classic dichotomy between good and evil, black and white, and for Star Wars fans, the dark side and the force. And in Swan Lake, one ballerina performs both roles.

The movie Black Swan is brilliant. It doesn't follow the story of the ballet per se, it follows the story of a young ballerina, anxious about her obscurity in the corps de ballet (a fate that her dancer mother lived) and her ambition to be as perfect as her ballet idol...the retiring principal dancer of the company. The dancing is exquisite in this movie. I'm still in touch with Mariane Beausejour who now lives in Austin Texas and that is one of the things she loved about the movie. The quality of the dancing is very high.

Natalie Portman trained for a year in preparation for the role of the would-be swan queen, Nina Sayers. Innocent, tender, hard working, dedicated, Nina is perfect for the white swan. But to become the Black Swan – she has give up being the perfect daughter, the perfect dancer, the perfect girl. As she prepares for the role, she loses herself in a sea of questionable decisions and erratic behaviour. To gain perfection in ballet's most coveted, most beautiful role, the Black Swan, she has to give up perfection. Slowly, as she sinks into the psychosis of perfection, seeing every other ballerina as a threat, Nina creates experiences that are as real to us in the audience, only to find out she has created them in her mind. On opening night, she performs badly as the white swan. And yet is as if she becomes a real black swan, she dances ballet's most coveted role exquisitely, it is the finest performance of her career. On opening night, she also has a psychotic breakdown. You'll have to see the movie to see how it ends; I don't want to give it away. But we leave the theatre with the same question – did the end, justify the means.

Friends I don't have an answer. And that's what's brilliant about this movie and about the text. Everyday, each of us faces situations which call us to stand in our values and operate from the place of integrity. This is leadership not just for some of us, but for all of us. Every day, the messenger crosses our path and presents us with options for acting in the world. Jesus returned to his text, quoted his bible, as a way of discerning his path. It's not a bad choice....to ground ourselves in our faith.

You`ve often heard me say, a good way of discerning the next step is to ask`What would love do now?" Others might say: "what would Jesus do?" Easy questions; but when we`re faced with some of the dilemmas of everyday living in the 21st century, sometimes I don`t think Jesus would have a clue what to do. When we get to the fork in the road, we have to take it, if we`re going to live.

What we can hope for is that when we make the choices we have to make, with the best the best information we have at the time, when we ask, we will be surrounded by angels who will minister to us. That`s good news today. Amen.