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3/6/22—University Presbyterian Church
Luke 4:1-14

POWER CHOICES

Lent begins with a study of power. That might not seem too apparent when we consider that the lectionary for the first Sunday in Lent always includes the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. And thus it would appear that Lent begins with the topic of *temptation*. But lying at the root of temptation is a deeper issue: the issue of power. Jesus' time in the wilderness is an occasion when he wrestles with the topic of power: of what power will guide and shape his life, and of how he will use his power and for what purposes.

The topic of power is presented in the very first sentence of our passage today. The gospel writer of Luke tells us that "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." There are two things we learn from this first sentence. First, Jesus has just come back from the Jordan River, where, as we might recall, he was baptized. Jesus has just come from his baptism, where the Holy Spirit descends upon him and God's voice is heard declaring, "You are my Son, the Beloved." At this baptism, a power has come upon Jesus—the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the second thing we know from this first sentence in our passage for today, is that this power is still with Jesus as he enters the wilderness. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." Jesus enters the wilderness filled with power—the power that came from his baptism.

And out there in the wilderness, Jesus faces a great test about how he will use his power. Will he use his power for personal gain? Will he use his power for self-advancement and glory?

Will he use his power to test God's faithfulness? Jesus faces the choice about how he will use his power.

Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "Nearly all men can stand adversity. But if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Think about that. Nearly all people can stand adversity. But if you want to test a person's character, give them power.

We've seen how true this is haven't we? All the stories about corrupt politicians, and misconduct among directors, and CEO's, and media giants have revealed those in power who have been tested and found wanting.

The trouble comes, however, when we associate the misuse of power only with those who occupy positions of authority. When we think of powerful people we tend to think about government leaders, corporate executives, clergy, teachers—people in leadership or positions of authority. And we often fail to appreciate the tremendous power that we ourselves possess.

Power, after all, is simply the capacity to act. And we all possess the capacity to act. We have more power than we often realize. Our money is power. Our education is power. Our social status is power. Our ability to act with kindness is power. Our capacity to call someone, write someone, march for someone, to send a check to someone, is power. Power lies in our ability to invite someone, include someone, notice someone, visit someone, forgive someone.

How we use *our* power is the test of *our* character. And every day, every day we are given the choice about how we will use our power.

Many years ago when I worked at another congregation, the youth of my church and the youth from another church came together for a mission trip. Mary was a girl from the other youth group who did not fit the typical teenaged girl mold and thus had not always received social acceptance among her peers. But for some reason on this trip she became the most

popular person around whom all the other youth gravitated. I could see that she was really enjoying this newfound popularity. She was funny and she was cool and all the youth loved being around her—including Ron, a geeky boy from my group. Ron was awkward, and often immature and annoying in his efforts to gain attention. It became clear that Ron was totally taken with Mary and all he wanted was to be allowed to exist in her orbit. One day on the trip Mary came to me with her dilemma about Ron. He was irritating and kept wanting to hang around her she didn't know what to do about him. And so Mary and I had a conversation about the power she possessed. I explained to her that she had within her hands a significant power: the power to include or the power to exclude. I invited her to consider what either choice might mean for Ron. We talked about what including Ron in the circle of her group of friends might communicate to the rest of the youth—what lessons the other youth might learn from her. As I left her pondering these questions, I hoped she might recall her own previous experiences of social exclusion. Later that day I saw Mary surrounded by her groups of friends, laughing and joking with one another, and there, there was Ron, right there among them, wearing the biggest grin on his face as Mary gave him a friendly shove.

We possess an awesome power. And like Jesus, that power comes to us at our baptism. Nothing magical happens at baptism. But something essentially important happens nevertheless. Similar to Jesus' baptism, our baptism acknowledges that the power of God's love rests upon us. The power of God's love rests upon us. And baptism calls us to live as those empowered by the Spirit of God in walking God's way in this world. We are empowered to walk God's way in this world.

Out there in the wilderness, Jesus faced a vulnerable moment—a time of testing about which power would fill him and guide him and shape him. That is what the wilderness

symbolizes in the story—a vulnerable time and place. We all have our own wilderness occasions of vulnerability—when we are faced with choices about what power will fill us.

We often think about wilderness times as those occasions of suffering and hardship, loss and pain, difficulty and struggle. But I wonder something. What if the most dangerous wilderness for us is not our times of suffering or hardship. What if our greatest wilderness vulnerability lies precisely in our prosperity. Jesus often warned about the challenge prosperity brings to our walk of faith. What if all our comforts, all our resources, all our advantages, all our securities are in fact our greatest vulnerability—when our characters are tested by how we use our power? Will we hold fast to our resources? Will we blame people who are vulnerable? Will we turn away the desperate because they don't fit into neatly prescribed categories or classifications? Will we make purchases without thought? Will we live only for ourselves? Will we resist changes for our planet's welfare because they are inconvenient? Our characters are tested by how we use our power.

Jesus enters the wilderness filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Then he is tested out there in the wilderness in a time of vulnerability about how he will use his power. But when he leaves the wilderness, the power of God has not been taken from him, for Luke writes, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee." The Holy Spirit's powerful presence remains with Jesus, and will guide him and strengthen him for the ministry that lies ahead. He possesses God's power. As do we.