

LIVING IN THE HEART ACT OR REACT?

Matthew 4: 1-11

How many of you here never have stress in your life? How many of you here never have things that upset you? How many of you here never have people in your life that aggravate you? How many of you here have things always go smoothly in your life, your health, your pets, your country, your car, your job, your bed? Most of us here today have things that go wrong in our lives. Our list is long of the things that don't go right in our lives: family members who disagree with us, health problems, politicians who frustrate our hopes, sports' teams that don't live up to our expectations, and on and on. Every day is filled with wonderful opportunities and also with many challenges. So, how do we deal with it all? Some of us just get angry at others. Some of us eat more than we should. Some of us dwell on the problem and tell all of our friends about it. Some of us lose sleep. Some of us build a tough protective shell around our hearts where no one can get in, even those who love us. Here is a stress management technique recommended in all the latest psychological texts on the internet: Picture yourself near a stream. Birds are softly chirping in the crisp, cool, mountain air. No one knows your secret place. You are in total seclusion from that hectic place called "the world". The soothing sound of a gentle waterfall fills the air with a cascade of serenity. The water is clear. You can easily make out the face of the person you're holding under the water... There now.....feeling better?

Our Bible story today from Matthew tells us about an intense time of stress for Jesus in the wilderness. He is faced with the major temptations of life while he is not in the best of shape. He is hungry, tired and alone and is being tempted by the need for power, security and affection. All the things that he didn't seemingly have were being presented to him and all he had to do was accept them. The interesting thing about Jesus' time in the wilderness is that it is similar to the time of the people of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years when Moses led them out of Egypt. They wandered in the desert and struggled with the same frustrations that Jesus dealt with: hunger, loneliness, and lack of security. Yet the difference here is that Jesus didn't give in to the temptations that were presented to him. He stayed focused on his mission and his relationship with God above everything else. What made the difference in those two stories? Of course some of you might say, "Well he was the Son of God so he had super powers and was not going to react like ordinary people do." I believe that there is some truth to this kind of response but there is more to it. I believe that the key here is the phrase "was led up by the Spirit." It is God who directs the action and not the tempter. The Spirit "leads" Jesus into the wilderness and not the frustrations of life. And Jesus was able to focus on his life in the Spirit even in the face of the worst conditions because that is where he dwelt all the time. He knew his true home was in the Spirit of God and he was grounded in that knowledge that no stressors or disastrous events could move him away. He lived in his heart, in the heart of God.

So, is that really possible for us? Do we dare during this season of Lent to imagine a life above the daily frustrations of life? Do we dare to dream of being centered in the heart of God to act always out of love and not to live as reactionaries moving from one crisis to the next? C. S. Lewis in his book, *SURPRISED BY JOY*, describes well how it feels on the inside when we center our lives on being reactionaries: "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambition, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatred. Their name is legion." Do we dare to hope beyond this pit of misery?

I do believe that this is an invitation for each one of us, especially during Lent. Yet our minds will not be the place to go for answers because 83% of human thought is repetitive and useless. We cannot reason our way into this deeper place of peace and love. We have to learn to trust our hearts.

A couple of years ago at the hospital in Bend, Oregon, there was a training for the staff called HeartMath to help them deal with the stresses of trauma, death, and overload. I was fascinated to learn that scientists now are discovering more about the intelligence of the heart. This group called HeartMath is now a cutting edge performance company providing a range of unique services, products, and technology to help people deal with stress and their main focus is on the heart. These doctors and scientists discovered that in order to effectively relieve stress it's important to understand that it is not the external events or situations that do the harm; it's how you respond to those stressful events. More precisely, it's how you feel about them that determine whether you *feel* the negative effects of stress and ultimately relieve stress.

Emotions, or feelings, have a powerful impact on the human body. Emotions like frustration, insecurity and depressing feelings are stressful and inhibit optimal health and relief from stress. Positive emotions like appreciation, care, and love not only feel good, they promote health, performance and well-being.

HeartMath's research has shown when you learn how to intentionally shift to a positive emotion, heart rhythms immediately change. A shift in heart rhythms may not seem important but in fact it creates a favorable cascade of neural, hormonal and biochemical events that benefit the entire body. The stress relief effects are both immediate and long lasting. It is also important to know that the rhythm of our hearts can affect those around us. The HeartMath scientists measured the electrical fields around people and have proven that the way our hearts feel is felt by other people who are within 10 feet of us. Negative feelings and rhythms can become like a virus which we catch from others.

It is amazing to see that science is finally catching up to the ancient teachings of faith. Jesus was not a doctor or a scientist doing heartmath but he knew how to live in his heart and how to serve God and the world out of that place. In his book, "A Guide for the Perplexed" E. F. Schumacher talks about three tasks for humans:

1. Learn from society and tradition. This is when we learn from society or faith about what is acceptable and not acceptable, about rules and norms. This is when faith is all about moral choices, what is right and what is wrong. We learn from the outside. We fit into the norms of others. This gives us temporary happiness. The tribe we belong to and its norms are the focus.
2. Interiorize this knowledge, learn to think for yourself and become self directed. This is when we question the beliefs that we were taught before. The rigid rules don't seem to make us happy anymore. We see that there is more to life.
3. Grow beyond the narrow concerns of the ego. Learning to surrender and to live in our hearts. Surrendering to God and dying to our false selves. This is dying to one's likes and dislikes. We get to be God directed instead of other directed. God is what is most important. This is the hardest stage. We need spiritual mentors to guide us in order to truly let go.

This is our invitation today, to be God directed, to be led by the Spirit. We can sit here and analyze the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. We can sit and analyze the temptations and frustrations of our lives, but the invitation is to learn how to surrender to God by living in our hearts. There is an outline in your bulletin today about living in the heart and some qualities of living in the heart. I hope that you will take it home and try to practice it at least during this season of Lent. The first quality of living in the heart is getting in touch with God's love and compassion that is within you. Nelson Mandela once said "Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate, but that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us." Are you in touch with the light of God in you? Do you know your heartsong?

The remarkable Mattie Stepanek died in 2004 at the age of 13. He was an incredible spirit. In his few years, the courageous boy authored five books of heart-felt poetry that touched millions of adults as well as children. One such collection of poems called "Heartsongs" made the New York Times bestseller list. By all rights Mattie could have been a bitter and lonely young boy. His disease had taken the lives of his three siblings. He knew he was going to die. But he determined to live until he did. He believed God had something special to do with his life. Despite his diagnosis of mitochondrial myopathy, despite having a trach in his throat all the time, a ventilator and oxygen always handy, his goals in life were to become a daddy, a writer, a public speaker, and most of all, a peacemaker. He succeeded in most of them. In his poem "Heartsongs," he says:

*I have a song
deep in my heart
and only I can hear it.
If I close my eyes and sit very still,
it is so easy to listen to my song.
When my eyes are open
and I am so busy and moving and busy,
If I take time and listen very hard,
I can hear my heartsong.
It makes me feel very happy.*

May you be blessed this season of Lent to know your heartsong and to listen to it everyday no matter what the circumstances might be.