

Our scripture passages for today, for those listening later online, are

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Psalm 19, James 4:7-5:6, Mark 9:38-48

Have you ever used the phrase, “The devil made me do it?” I can honestly say, I never have said it in any level of seriousness. I can’t remember ever saying it at all, but if I had, I’m pretty sure I would have had a slight smile at the time.

But it is a phrase, that while I haven’t used it exactly, I’m certain I have said at times, or at least thought, “I had no choice.”

Have you ever said that you had no choice? There were no other options? Or asked rhetorically, “what choice did I have?”

In recent years, probably because of some major life changes, I have reflected more and more on choices. I must confess that in reflecting on choices, that even though I did think of how God’s word could be a guide in **some** of them... it was not usually what I thought of first.

And then I read our lesson this morning from James. And it struck me what he was telling us we could choose. The wording hadn’t really hit me before, but as I read it this time (perhaps because of how I have been reflecting more and more

on choices), it hit me that he was telling us that certain things are choices that we have.

Our reading in James began in Chapter 4, vs 7 with the words, **“So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”**

Did you hear that? After telling us to humble ourselves before God, therefore telling us that we can choose this, he says **“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”** James immediately takes away our excuse, “the devil made me do it.”

And then he says that we can choose to come close to God. That we can wash our hands, and purify our hearts. I read this, **“purify your heart”** and my first thought was, “Isn’t that what God does?” But then I was reminded in **1 Peter 1:22**, that we have a role in purifying ourselves, by as Peter says, **“obeying the truth.”**

Skipping down a few verses in James, down to verse 11 we read, **“Don’t speak evil against each other...”** The Contemporary English Version reads, **“don’t say cruel things about others”**

I don’t know about you, but this wording stings for me a bit. I have been cruel in what I’ve said about others and I am certain that I have justified it with

phrases like, “they deserve it”, “they asked for it”, or probably the worst, “I’m only saying what is true about them.”

But here James is saying, “don’t do this.” Therefore, I have a choice.

I like the word “why.” A word that if you spend any time around a small child, you get tired of very quickly. But when I look at scripture, I find myself often asking, “Why?”

Why do I not choose to humble myself? Why do I not always choose to resist the devil? Why do I not always choose to obey the truth. Why do I sometimes, more often than I like to admit, speak evil, say cruel things about another.

Our lesson in James ends with a warning to the rich, and he says in chapter 5, verse 5, **“You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire.”**

I think we have a clue here, and I think we also see it also in our Gospel reading and in our Old Testament reading. In our Gospel reading we saw how the disciples told someone to stop casting out demons in the name of Jesus because he wasn’t in their group.

And in the Old Testament reading we see people whining for what they

didn't have, griping that what they had wasn't good enough, wishing for better times.

I think in all of these we see a bit of the answer to the question, "Why?"

In each of these cases we see a focus on self, and not on God.

The rich taking care of themselves and as James said, robbing others. I wonder what excuse they gave for making that choice? Or for the disciples telling the person to stop casting out demons in the name of Jesus? What was their excuse for that choice, to protect their brand? Have to make sure it is done just right?

And the people of Israel whining about not living in "better" times when they had all that food.. while living in captivity. They were choosing to whine and once again I think we see the "Why?", **they were focused on themselves and not on God.**

As I thought about choices, the one verse that came to my head right away, and perhaps you have thought of it this morning, comes from **Joshua**. It is from chapter **25**, verse **15**, where we read **"...choose today whom you will serve..."**.

Why do I not always choose to humble myself? Why do I not always choose to resist the devil? Why do sometimes choose to speak cruelly of others?

Because that day, I probably didn't make the choice to serve God. ***"Choose today"***.. I love that, because it has an implication of choosing now, and of choosing anew each day.

Other verses also point to this being a daily choice.. ***"And [Jesus] said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."*** Luke 9:23

Paul says in **1 Corinthians**, chapter **15**, verse **31**, ***"... I die every day!"***

It is dying to self, and Christ living in and through us.

On Thursday night, Pastor Brook after Vespers was sharing about how much he loved the Collect for this week. How in it, it showed how God's declares his almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity.

I don't know about you, but this brings me great joy and peace, because I need God's mercy for all the times I did not choose to serve him. And I know that those choices had consequences, but if it wasn't for his mercy and pity, I wouldn't be here today.

When we do not choose today to serve God, we set ourselves up to make choices that can be life destroying. Whether with our resources, our words, are action or inaction.

I first read these verses several weeks ago, and immediately began reflecting on choices. But just two days ago, my aunt who is 86 years old, attempted suicide. I am so grateful that she wasn't successful. As I got the news yesterday, I hit me immediately how this was a choice. And knowing her, I believe it was a choice she made because she hasn't chosen to believe that she can be forgiven for other choices.

And so this Collect.. I am looking forward to calling her soon and I've been reflecting on what I'll say.. I don't know exactly what yet, but this Collect so beautifully tells us about God's mercy, and I so want her to know **that**.

We have choices, and they all begin with the daily choice, "**whom will I serve?**"