

Even with the suspense of *Ground Hog Day*, the romance of *Valentines Day* and the day off to remember *Presidents Washington and Lincoln*, I have the feeling that in a poll of favorite months FEBRUARY might not make the top ten. Around here its mostly a cold, wintry month -- maybe that's why is has the fewest days, so we can get it over with as soon as possible. Maybe February is a good time for facing harsh realities. That is what we find in the gospel today. These are not really warm, fuzzy, feel good, sort of readings set before us today.

Each reading presents us with a choice of the two ways: You can be the plant with deep roots in the lord, able to be solid and steadfast even in difficult times Or you can be the bush that dries up and blows away when the rainy season ends, leaving you on your own and all alone. It's a simple choice.

Where Matthew has nine soaring beatitudes or blessings, Luke has four blessings and four curses. You can be the one to received the blessings of God or you can be the one to suffer the curse. It's a simple choice.

Pual tells us that you can believe in the resurrection of Jesus and have hope to share in it, or you can say there is no resurrection and have nothing to look forward to but final, cold, meaningless death. It's a simple choice.

It's quite a temptation for a preacher to present you with the apparently simple choice of heaven or hell, life and blessing or curses and death. It's always been easy to do a hell fire and brimstone sermon.

One part fear of God, one part dramatic presentation, one part black and white situation. It's the easy way, but it isn't quite faithful to basic message of Jesus who described his Father as the crazy farmer ... who paid even the laziest person the same wage as the overachiever, or the prodigal father who happily showered gifts on his unfaithful son. It doesn't match the practice of the church who offers reconciliation to those who sin, and believes in purgatory -- a second chance for those who haven't quite reached their goal in life.

But even today's readings aren't really all that harsh when you look at them a bit more carefully. In Jeremiah's gardening lesson, the plant he praised didn't start out with deep roots. They grew that way, slowly.

In Luke's gospel there is nothing especially praiseworthy about being poor, hungry or hated. Jesus does not equate the blessed with those in misery. He does recognize as blessed those who - in spite of their situation - have heard his call and are willing to endure these things for the sake of his promise.

The happy person, the stable person is the one who has rooted his/her life in the long run, in the big picture. They recognize that the things that plague or delight us today are only part of our life and not even the most important part and certainly not a lasting part.

The most important part is -- as Paul points out -- the hope that we find in Jesus Christ who has the power to overcome anything we face in this life, even death itself.

There are always choices to be made in life. And most of our choices won't really be all that black and white -- heaven or hell. The choices we make each day may not seem so important or the consequences so great, but each choice changes our focus a bit. It can happen so slowly we might not even notice it. Each choice either narrows our concern to some immediate benefit or looks beyond the moment to some greater good. Throughout most of our lives, it will be a question of being able or willing to look beyond the pain or the rewards in front of us to the horizon beyond us where the lord calls to us, where he offers us something more lasting, something guaranteed to yield the sort of happiness and blessings that won't wither with the changing season.

We all know it 's true that the simple black and white decisions are the easy ones. The challenge of not losing hope when so many little things wear away at you is always the more difficult path.

It is hard to imagine a sane person would choose evil, suffering and pain, loneliness or death -- the average human will always try to choose something that looks like a good deal for now anyway. But it is possible that we might overlook the greater good and the true happiness if we focus too closely on what is in front of us rather than the road that stretches infinitely ahead of us.

When you look carefully at the options the readings set before us, it seems a simple choice; but that doesn't mean that is always an easy choice, or our first choice, or our consistent choice. These are readings that require us to take a cold, hard look at what we have chosen, what we have made of ourselves. Not one of our favorite things; it's a February sort of thing. But without February there is no spring; without the choosing there is no promise.