

Into the Wilderness... If We Choose

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Church of the Redeemer

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"*

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

*'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'*

and

*'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Luke 4:1-13

And so another Lent begins. Forty days in the wilderness - if we choose. I wonder if Jesus had a choice? Luke says the Spirit led him into the wilderness after his baptism, but Mark says the Spirit drove him. Is Lent really a choice for us; I'm not so sure. "Lent" – a season of wilderness – comes to most of us sooner or later: we can choose to pay attention, or we can let it overwhelm and defeat us. Maybe the Lents we choose can prepare us for the "Lents" we don't choose. There was a period of my life during and after my divorce when I wasn't sure Lent would ever end; there was a wilderness not of my choosing. Many today are experiencing the wilderness of unemployment - perhaps they don't recognize it as a spiritual journey, but it is. The Lent we are just entering – the Lent we choose – is about realizing that all of life is a spiritual journey; we may go by different routes but they all, it would seem, take us through the desert.... So let's look with care this morning at Jesus' sojourn in the desert for perhaps his journey can inform our own.

Up out of the Jordan he walks; full of the Holy Spirit, Luke says: full of the experience of God's love and acceptance of him as Son, sure now of his vocation. And the Holy Spirit leads Jesus

... into the desert. How curious. I wonder why? Filled with God's fullness and then, the wilderness? What's that about?

I think I've shared with you already something of that wilderness experience I had as a college student, when I lost my faith during a riot in Newark, N.J; told you of the spiritual confusion and darkness that descended upon me and how, by the grace of God, I was gradually led back to faith. There came a moment when I was ready to re-commit myself to the Way of Christ, to respond to the "Yes" God had spoken to me with a "yes" of my own. As friends prayed with me, I experienced a depth of divine Hospitality I'd never before known. I guess you could say I was filled with the Holy Spirit. And after so many months of confusion and anguish, I felt such joy and peace and hope....

I wanted so to share my joy with others, especially with my husband of five years. He was now, after all, a seminary student. I was sure he'd understand, sure he'd want for himself this joy I'd found and join in this community of supportive friends. But he didn't. And, to be honest, as I look back on it now, I can see that I communicated not just the joy I felt – which was truly genuine – but also a subtle ... what? Self - righteousness? Certainly there was a self-assuredness that bordered on spiritual arrogance. I wonder: is the desert somehow necessary to spiritual health? Maybe the wilderness is the crucial difference between "fullness of the Spirit" and "pride that goeth before a fall."

My husband's less-than-enthusiastic reaction to my overbearing zeal did become a summons for me to enter the wilderness. I wonder, did the Spirit lead me there? The discomfort Sam felt with me and what I was experiencing created doubt and confusion in me, dampening my ardor and forcing me to a contemplation I wouldn't have chosen, to a "desert" that was, indeed, necessary to my spiritual health and the health of our relationship. The spiritual life, it would seem, is so constructed that if we don't choose the desert, it chooses us. The fullness of the Spirit is a tricky thing for mortal souls; maybe we need the desert so that we can see all that is in us. I wonder whether the very barrenness of the desert forces us to an undistracted look at What Really Is.

And so Jesus finds himself in the desert, where he is tempted by the devil. I wonder how it was to be alone in the wilderness, with only his imagination to keep him company. That, of course, is just where Satan meets him: in his imagination. Forty days without human companionship, without food; forty days with himself – his thoughts, his feelings, his fears, doubts, hopes, dreams.... And Satan is right there.

It's as though the devil creates an alternative reality and invites Jesus to go there. It's a place of abundance: bread, glory, protection. A place where physical appetites are met; a place of power, privilege, and respect; a place where God is on your side and angels at your beck and call. "And, Jesus, it's so easy to get there. Just bow down and worship me; just give yourself to me..."

But it's a lie: the devil's "reality"....

Reading this gospel story again got me to thinking about my own imagination, which is pretty active: telling stories has always been natural to me, a form of contemplation, I suppose, that helps me see more deeply into What Is. And I hope those who hear the stories I create or re-create in

sermons or on retreats also find them illuminating. The imagination is a gift, the working of the soul, the way thoughts are of the mind and feelings of the heart – but the imagination has a shadow side as well: the place where Satan meets us.

Because, you see, when I'm upset or troubled, my imagination can create a different sort of scenario: a virtual reality of "he said/she said." And, of course, I'm the heroine and those others who're upsetting me are, well, wrong-headed at best, downright villainous at worst. I attribute to them all sorts of things: ignorance, callousness, gross insensitivity, ill-will, short-sightedness.... It's so easy to get there. It feels so good, so right, so righteous. But it's a lie. And if I don't catch myself, such imagining can become a distorted lens through which I see my life and those around me.

If contemplation is the act of seeing What Is, the imagination-thus-tempted becomes the opposite: a place of what isn't, a place of deception and self-deception. It creates a "reality" that tempts us to be less than we're called to be. And if we're not paying attention, we can end up living that "reality." Maybe that's why we need the desert; maybe Satan is always wooing our imaginations, but in the desert we can see it more clearly. When we give ourselves time to pay attention, when we choose Lent, accept the wilderness as the Spirit's gift, we have keep our wits about us and so have a chance to find our way back to What Really Is, to God's Reality.

Jesus shows us how. And what does he do? He remembers. The antidote to a tempted imagination is the act of prayerful remembrance. Jesus recalls to mind God's word, using scripture like a sword to cut through the attractive, but utterly false, alternate reality the devil would craft in his imagination. From Deuteronomy:

- "One does not live bread alone." Our bodies are gifts to be enjoyed – food, physical pleasure, the delights of the senses, the joy of movement, sport and exercise – and we do not live to serve our bodies but they to serve the larger purposes of faithful relationship, service to others, appropriate self-care.

- "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Power and authority – all power and authority – come only from God; despite appearances to the contrary, none of it is ours. And the glory? Belongs to God alone.

- "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." God's will and way unfold to us in the living of our lives. God can't be manipulated to serve our own ends, no matter how noble these ends might seem to us.

Yes, Jesus remembers; but they are not words left over from some childhood catechism class. I suspect, they were words he knew by heart because God's Spirit had etched them there in the school of life. Jesus had been paying attention and when Satan tempts him to imagine an easy, abundant life of privilege, power and protection he knows better because he's already met God in his hunger, in his longing for affirmation, in his struggle to know God's will. And so He remembers: he remembers who he is as a child of God, and what this means for the living of his life..

We, too, are invited to remember; that's what we do here, Sunday after Sunday. That's why

we need to be here; and Lent is a great time to practice the discipline of showing up each week! Being here schools our memories, makes us aware of the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. So does daily prayer – the Gospels are full of stories of Jesus retiring to pray, choosing the desert as it were, so that the memories would be there when he needed them.

It is during the Lents we choose that we learn to remember, that we learn to pay attention to the word God's Spirit is writing on our hearts in the lessons of our lives. It is during these Lents that we learn to notice the temptations of our imagination and to choose What Really Is over our own constructed realities. Then, when the Lents that we do not choose come upon us, we remember, and we can see the Spirit awaiting us in our need, see the Spirit moving us toward a deeper wholeness.

And the devil? Departs from us until a more opportune time....