

“Into the Wilderness”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from Luke 4:1-13

Hear the words from the disciple Luke:

Read Luke 4:1-13

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we are not the people we ought to be. The results of our sin are all around us. You gave us a good garden, and look what a mess we made of your goodness. We have despoiled our garden home, we have rebelled against your will for our world, and we have distorted your image in us.

Lord Jesus, keep working with us and on us. Keep restoring your image in us. Wash us clean. Rebirth us. Take our wounded world and re-create it. Take our lives and transform us. During these forty days, do something about our sin. Amen.

Intro:

Only two of the four gospels give the long version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. John leaves it out altogether and Mark's gospel covers the whole thing in two sentences: the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, he was there forty days, Satan tempted him, wild beasts kept him company, and angels waited on him. That's it; that's all Mark knew--or that's all Mark thought we needed to know--about what happened between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness.

Anyone who remembers more than that is remembering Matthew or Luke, because those are the only two who go into any detail about what the devil said and what Jesus said back.

What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs to put Jesus to the test, but Jesus knows more

“Into the Wilderness”

than what the Bible says. Jesus knows how to do what the Bible says, which is how he passes his wilderness test.

Every time the devil offered him more--more bread, more power, more protection--Jesus turned him down. No to the bread, Jesus says, no to the kingdoms, no to the angelic bodyguards. He is full, he says, on worshipping God and serving only him. So by the end of the story, the devil still has all his bribes in his bag and Jesus is free to go.

Since you've already heard about a million sermons on what Jesus and the devil said to each other, I thought I'd skip that part today, especially since neither of us is likely to be put to the exact same test. When it's our turn, none of us is going to get the Son of God test. We're going to get the regular old Adam and Eve test, which means that the devil won't need much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet and a tax refund to turn our heads.

What I want to focus on instead is where the test took place--the wilderness--because I have an idea that every one of us has already been there. Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection--just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand.

“Into the Wilderness”

Needless to say, this is not a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness test, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about.

I guess that could sound like bad news, but I don't think it is. I think it is good news-- because even if no one ever wants to go there, and even if those of us who end up there want out again as soon as possible, the wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. Take Jesus, for instance.

How did he end up there? The Spirit led him.

What was he full of? He was full of The Holy Spirit.

What else did he live on? Nothing.

How long was he there? Weeks and weeks.

How did he feel at the end? He was famished.

What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to him? **It freed him**--from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose, 1) from hungry cravings for things with no power to give him life, 2) from any illusion he might have had that God would make his choices for him. After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else.

This wisdom about the value of the wilderness is just about lost, I think--lost to popular American culture for sure and lost even to the Christian tradition that is charged with preserving it. Those of you still observe Lent may get a dose of it every year around this time, even if it is

“Into the Wilderness”

reduced to cutting down on how much you drink or putting a dollar in a box for every dessert you skip. The kernel, the essential part, of the wisdom is still there: that anyone who wants to follow Jesus all the way to the cross needs the kind of clarity and grit that is found only in the wilderness.

From Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, Christians are invited to do without some things they are perfectly capable of having--such as rich food or loud parties with their friends--and to take on some things that they are just as capable of avoiding--such as a moral inventory or a lunch date with someone they are mad at.

"Lent," it is called, from an English word meaning "spring"--not just a reference to the blooming flowers pushing their ways out of the ground in the season before Easter, but also to the greening of the human soul--pruned with repentance, fertilized with fasting, spirited with self-appraisal, mulched with prayer. It wasn't until seminary that I learned that Lent wasn't about punishing myself for being human--and it took me longer to figure out that it wasn't about giving up sweets or working out--so I don't blame anyone who has decided to give Lent a pass.

But if you have spent a lot of time and/or money trying to acquire whatever it takes to grow your soul without seeing any new buds/new life, then maybe a little walk in the wilderness is worth a try--a few weeks of choosing to live on less, not more--of practicing subtraction instead addition--not because your regular life is bad but because you want to make sure it is your real life--the one you long to be living--which can be hard to do when you're living on fast food and busyness. Remember when red lights gave you a minute just to sit and think? Not any more--not with your cell phone right there in your lap begging you to reach out and touch someone.

“Into the Wilderness”

I know people who give up using their cell phones for Lent. Can you imagine? I’ve heard of other people who’ve given up watching television or shopping or eating while they are standing up. Of course, none of these things would impress people who have spent their whole lives trying to figure out where the next meal is coming from, but in a culture of plenty I am impressed with anyone who decides to make it without anesthesia for a while--to give up whatever appliances or habits or substances they use to keep themselves from feeling what it really feels like to live the kind of lives they are living.

I mean, almost everyone uses something--if not anesthesia, then at least a favorite pacifier: murder mysteries, Facebook, Netflix, reruns of The Office, Pottery Barn catalogs, margaritas from your favorite Mexican restaurant. I'm not saying those are awful things. I'm just saying they are distractions--things to reach for when a person is too tired, too sad, or too afraid to enter the wilderness of the present moment--to wonder what it's really about or who else is in it or maybe just to make a little bed in the hot dry sand.

The problem for most of us is that we cannot go straight from setting down the cell phone to hearing the still, small voice of God in the wilderness. If it worked like that, churches would be full and Verizon would be out of business. If it worked like that, Lent would only be about twenty minutes long.

What we have instead are forty whole days for finding out what life is like without the usual painkillers, which is how most of us learn... what led us to use them in the first place. Once you take the headphones off, silence can be really loud. Once you turn off the television, a night can get really long. After a while you can start thinking that all of this quiet emptiness or, worst case, all this howling wilderness, is a sign of things gone badly wrong: devil on the loose,

“Into the Wilderness”

huge temptations, no help from the audience, God gone AWOL--not to mention your own spiritual insufficiency to deal with any of these things.

But if you remember to breathe--and say your prayers--then nine times out of ten you can make it through your first night with no extra bread, power, or protection. You can get used to the sound of your own heart beating and whatever it is that is yipping out there. You may even be able to sleep a little while and wake up gladder to be alive than you can ever remember being. So there are thirty-nine days to go. So don't count. Take it one day at a time.

After you have reached for your pacifier a few times and remembered it is not there--not because someone stole it from you but because you made a conscious decision to give it up--then you may discover a whole new level of conversation with yourself.

Are you hungry?

I am famished.

Well, what's wrong with that? Are you dying?

No.

Can you stand being hungry for a while longer?

Maybe. I guess so.

Okay, so what else? Are you lonely?

Yes, I am! I am terribly lonely!

What's wrong with being alone? Will it kill you?

I don't like it.

That's not what I asked. Can you live through it?

Probably not, but I'll try.

“Into the Wilderness”

Our minds are geniuses at telling us that losing our pacifiers is going to kill us, but it's almost never true. All that's going to happen is that we're going to suck air for a while, then we're going to hiccup, then we're going to look around and see things without that pink plastic circle under our noses, which is going to turn out to be a good thing both for us and for everyone else in our lives.

But it would be a mistake for me to try to describe your wilderness exam. Only you can do that, because only you know what devils have your number, and what kinds of bribes they use to get you to pick up. All I know for sure is that a voluntary trip to the desert this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of those devils for life--not only because it is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot save you, but also because it is where you learn to trust the Spirit that led you there to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God and serve no other all the days of your life. ¹

Let us pray:

Blessed are you God of all creation and blessed is your Holy Son who was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan. Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations. And, as you know the weakness of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord. Amen.

¹ http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam

“Into the Wilderness”

Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.²

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>