

“Wilderness Way”

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

William C. Pender

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 2/21/10

4 *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² 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. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”*

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ ”

⁹ 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, ¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’

¹¹ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The season of Lent began this past Wednesday. We Christians did not come up with the season of Lent when we first began to trust in the God we know in Christ. There is no reason to look up the word “Lent” in our Bibles or in our Bible dictionaries. There was no such thing in Biblical times. Lent, this custom of focused 40 days of prayer and self-denial, did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and we believers had gotten “ho-hum” about our faith.

For the early followers of Jesus, when the history of the world did not come to a fast close after the New Testament era, as implied by Jesus and expected to some degree by Paul . . . when the world continued on and on, there was a letting down of energy and expectation. And in our own ways most us have felt the energy and enthusiasm of “living on the edge,” awaiting the big things, but then not be able to sustain the pace. Perhaps you know, as I know, those good intentions:

- X That Bible that we were going to read every day...begins to gather dust on the bookshelf.
- X That regular time of prayer we going to do...becomes less regular.
- X Those projects of compassionate service...of making a difference...get set aside or rescheduled for “later.”
- X Commitments to be in worship and Sunday School...grow slack.

We settle into a comfortable routine, remembering our days of passionate devotion the way we remembered other great enthusiasms of our younger days.

Little by little, we become devoted more to our comforts: an easy chair, a porch by the beach, a television to pacify our thirst for understanding and for adventure. We come to the conclusion that there is no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian. Before long it becomes very hard to pick us out from the population at large. We are just one “of the guys” and “one of the girls.”

No longer are we distinguished by our bold love for one another. No one gets in trouble for championing the cause of the poor and voiceless. There are no traffic light cameras that catch us in acts of “reckless generosity.” We avoid extremes, wanting to be nice rather than holy. And God moans out loud at this lukewarm, boring Christian faith.

Hearing that moan of God and sensing that sense of staleness within, someone suggested long ago that was it was time to call us back to our senses. And the Bible offered some clues about how to do that. After leaving Egypt under the leadership of Moses, the people of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Forty years to prepare...and only then were they ready to enter the Promised Land. But some of us don't have 40 years left. But what about 40 days? You may recall that Noah spent 40 days in the ark. And as one wag once said of the ark and those 40 rainy days and nights, “If weren't for the storm outside, no one could have put up with the smell within.” The great prophet Elijah spent 40 days in that same Exodus wilderness before hearing the still, small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent 40 days listening to God give the law.

Forty days...a good Biblical number. And, of course, there is also this story in the Gospels of Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness, during which he was sorely tested by the devil. Maybe we don't have 40 years, and maybe we don't have a wilderness to live in, giving up all our responsibilities, but we do have 40 days. And forty days of preparation is called Lent.

We Christians came up with this season of Lent in response to losing our “edge,” or focus, our passion. The word “Lent” comes from the old English word *lenten*, meaning “spring”—not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a spring time for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open our eyes to what remains. Forty days to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply ourselves . . . a self-imposed wilderness to discover again our connection to God.

In some ways Lent is a sort of an “Outward Bound” for the soul and spirit. Outward Bound is that wilderness program of self-discovery and awareness. No one has to do it—it is voluntary. But once you sign up, you commit the control of your life to some strangers who ask to you do some foolhardy things like walk backwards over a cliff with nothing but rope around your waist.

But the real test of Outward Bound is when you go solo. Part of the Outward Bound experience is to spend 24 hours alone in the wilderness. These strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next 24 hours—no cell phone, no radio, no means of contact...alone. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss, because you don't have anything with you. That is when you find out what you are really afraid of.

From reports of participants, we know that some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a lock on the door; others just wish they had a pillow. They find out what their pacifiers are—the habits, the substances, the surroundings they use to comfort themselves. We all have our pacifiers. This solo experience forces them to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God.

I think it fair to say that 99 percent of us, if not all of us, get addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming, working taking care of others, controlling, complaining, or playing. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. Addiction is that urgency about not “living without it”—whatever that “it” is. And when we don’t have “it,” there is an emptiness, a vacuum, a hollowness.

That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something wrong. It is actually “the holy of holies” inside of us. The Holy of Holies in the Temple was the place that only the high priest could go...and only once a year. It was the most likely place to find the infinite God. Those empty place...those vacuums...that hollowness—it is the place that God can particularly be a part of our lives. But most us, when we start feeling empty or restless, bored or anxious about nothing at all, we stick our pacifiers in our mouth and suck for all we are worth. Pacifiers do not nourish us; they do not fill the hollowness, but at least they plug the hole.

To enter into the wilderness is to leave pacifiers behind. And nothing is too small to give up. That’s the Lenten practice of giving up something for Lent. We give up one of our pacifiers. For forty days, we give up something that is important to you, but not vital. Important, but not vital...several years ago, one of my children wanted to give up homework for Lent. That doesn’t meet the criteria of being important but not vital.

What do we give up for Lent? People give up chocolate, reading the comics, eating desserts, playing computer games, drinking alcohol, watching a certain television program or television in general, checking Facebook . . . not bad habits, just a habit. And for forty days they pay attention to how often the mind and heart travel in that direction.

And what’s going to happen when you miss what you have given up? Instead of fixing the feeling, you live with it. What’s wrong with not feeding the craving? What do you sense about yourself and your journey with God in this craving? That’s wilderness identity question of Lent. The drive of the habit drives you to God.

Chances are, if you choose a Lenten discipline of giving up something, you will hear a little voice say to you, “You’ll starve without the pacifier.” The voice will continue: “It will make you more anxious than you need. It doesn’t hurt you or anyone else. You deserve a break. It’ll be okay.”

Like the voice that spoke to Jesus in the wilderness: “You’re hungry. Turn the stones into bread and be fed—there is nothing wrong with it.” And there isn’t. It is just the question of whether you’ll stay in the wilderness and discover who you are.

And, if you can ignore that first voice, a second one will come. This voice will say, “What you have given up is not a pacifier, it is a power tool. It is what picks you up. It is what relaxes you. It is what calms you after working hard. It works for you. It will help you.”

Like the voice that spoke to Jesus in the wilderness, “You are a powerful person who can do wonders, do it. It works for you. It will pick you up. There is nothing wrong with it.” And there isn’t. It’s just a question of whether you’ll stay in the wilderness and discover who you are.

If you do not fall for these two voices, there is level three: “If God really loves you, why waste your time on this silly exercise of giving up something. Do what is practical and useful and successful for you. If it works, don’t fight it. How can you argue with what is a winner for you?”

Like the voice that spoke to Jesus in the wilderness, “You want to be the Messiah? You want to change people lives? Then I have the method that will succeed.” And the method works. “You will win,” says the voice. Only...only we become what we serve—we become what we give our lives up to.

The methods we choose for living life give us our identity. And staying in the wilderness, even for forty days, can do so as well, indeed do us well. Staying in the wilderness to discover who you are; no, staying in the wilderness to discover whose you are. Staying in the wilderness to know to whom you belong.

Choosing the wilderness way for forty days—that’s the Lenten decision. Because we have become comfortable with our life, or at least used to its discomforts. The wilderness forces us to change. And change is always threatening. Better the enemy we know than the unknown. Change is always disturbing. But, like a brush with death, sometimes a disturbance wakes us up from our unconscious living.

Choosing the wilderness way may seem like settling for less—to live life less fully than we could. The Lenten discipline of giving something as harmless as a nice habit for forty days may seem waste of time, or even a loss. But for Noah in ark, Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah in the very same spot, Jesus in the wilderness, and host of those who have preceded us, these forty days, even a self-imposed wilderness way, are a matter of settling for more, not less. It is a matter of confirming that resolve to worship the Lord our God and serve no one else. To say to that voice that offers the easy way—“Get lost!” To expect great things from God and from yourself. Why should we settle for less, when we can settle for so much more?