

## Wilderness Strength

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:1-13; Luke 4:1-13

Text: "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." - Luke 4:1-2a

"And lead us not into temptation." All of us are familiar with those words from the Prayer of Our Savior, and they always come to my mind when I read the story of Jesus' temptation, which I read for you just a little while ago.

Isn't being led into temptation exactly what the Holy Spirit is doing to the freshly baptized Jesus? Isn't that what the text says?

All three of the synoptic gospels preserve the story of Jesus' temptation – only John omits it – and they all make it clear that Jesus went into the wilderness at the bidding of the Holy Spirit. Matthew even adds the words "to be tempted by the devil" when he says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, just to make sure we understand that Jesus was in the wilderness for a reason and what that reason was.

Jesus just didn't wander off. He was led. He was led by the Spirit, immediately after his rite of initiation into a new way of living in the world, and he was led by that Spirit to be tempted by the devil in the wilderness.

Now wilderness, for most of us, is somewhere we don't want to be. Human civilization arose from our reluctance to suffer the dangers and privations of the wilderness. We gathered ourselves together, first in caves, and then in compounds, and then in villages, and then in cities precisely to ward off the wilderness. We feel safe in here and most of us want to keep the things of the wilderness out there, "where the wild things are."

But the Bible has a more nuanced understanding of wilderness. Yes, it does have its dangers and privations, but Israel's prophets understood wilderness, like everything else in this world, to be an instrument in God's hand to bless those those capable of responding to that blessing.

When Moses tells the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy that he is about to die and that they're going to have to carry on with the next phase of their life without him, he asks them to understand their experience with God in the wilderness not as a burden, but as a blessing: "Remember," Moses says in Deuteronomy 8, "the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments," and all of that hard journey, through which God brought the Israelites, Moses tells them, was, "in the end to do you good."

And Jeremiah was commanded by God to tell the wayward people of Jerusalem that God remembered the devotion of their youth, their love as a bride, when they followed God, and that following was out in the wilderness.

So we can see from Scripture that God uses the wilderness to equip people for the life God would have them lead. Wilderness, far from being an empty waste, is for those capable of perceiving it a time of spiritual growth and strengthening. It's a time of getting away from the lures and luxuries and demands of civilization – the enslaving

fleshpots of Egypt no less than the illicit riches gained through injustice – and allowing the Spirit a chance to reach into the areas of our lives where we most need to grow.

And we cannot do that chained to our cell phones or Blackberries or desktops or any of the other dozens of ways we keep ourselves firmly fixed on the daily round of surface living.

“The world is too much with us” William Wordsworth complained in 1804, and that was before regular postal service, before the automobile, before the telephone, before television, before email, before text messaging, before Facebook, before Twitter, before Skype. The world we create increasingly draws us away from the world God has given us, and the more we fill our lives with the works of our own hands, the less room – spiritual room – we have to receive the gifts that God has given us, chief among them, the gift of ourselves.

And that's really what the story of Jesus' temptation is all about. It's about Jesus' going into the wilderness to discover who he really was, stripped of all the distracting commitments of daily living. He was alone, and when we are alone – when we've put aside all our worthy daily distractions – we discover what we're really made of and who we really are. We discover, in short, our character, that old-fashioned word that has fallen out of favor. Character, someone has said, is what we do when we think no one is watching, and that's what the wilderness helps us discover. Through temptation we discover our weakness, and through overcoming temptation we discover our strength. And in that process of discovery, we discover ourselves, God's greatest gift to us and the gift we so often ignore.

Lent is the season set aside by the church to help you go into the wilderness and discover your self, your true self, and the strength that comes from that discovery. We are strengthened, as every coach and every teacher knows, not only by succeeding, but also by failing, and Lent is the time when we are invited to go into the wilderness to discover how God will use our failures no less than our successes.

The temptations Jesus faced in his wilderness experience will not be ours; none of us will be offered the kingdoms of the world by the devil who owns them all. The greatest temptation that those of us who are responsible and respectable church-going types will face, in this Lent and in every other, is the temptation to resist the wilderness, the temptation to resist going to that place to be alone, where we can see ourselves as God sees us, fully, truly, and uniquely.

Resist that temptation, my friends. Resist the temptation to allow the world to tell you who you are. Resist the temptation to distract yourself endlessly from the hard work of discovering who you are before God and who God would have you be. Go into the wilderness where God is waiting to help you see the greatest gift you've been given in this world: the gift of your true self, temptations and all, and the gift of your true self, truly redeemed.