

“Walking Through the Wilderness”

The Rev. Dr. Robert M. Zanicky

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*1st Presbyterian Church
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Luke 4:1-14*

Years ago, when I first started my ministry, a college student asked me to take a “vocations exam.” This was an assignment for her. I agreed, hoping the result wouldn’t throw a wrench into my already chosen field.

I took the test. I don’t remember anything else about the results, except I scored very, very low on the vocation of “Forest Ranger.” Basically, it told me to stay out of the woods, the wilderness! I recall nodding in agreement as I read this outcome.

As a boy I loved playing in the woods, just across the street from my home. My friends and I practically lived in the woods, except for playing baseball, or going to school. But, when I got older – Holiday Inn won out, over camping in the wild. I still remember – Forest Ranger – out! Stay out of the wilderness! So true!

This morning I want to share about a wilderness that all of us want to “Keep out” – but a wilderness we all must walk through.

As Christians we have entered into the journey of Lent, a time of reflection on life, death and hope.

This season is an opportunity to once again define, “Who you are, why you are here”

This journey that you will traverse with Jesus, is truly an existential journey into your own private, personal life. And the ancients were quite wise. For this existential, real journey of your life, takes you into the wilderness in your life! The journey of life is encapsulated in the journey of Lent – from the wilderness, through betrayal, to death – to Easter Sunday morning – resurrection, purpose, life!!

But, you will not reach that Sunday morning without walking through the wilderness!

Blame God, get angry with God, question God, but – into the wilderness you will go!

Question – How will you walk through the wilderness of temptation? For indeed the wilderness of your life is a place that you pass through, you are not to live there forever. Will you succumb to temptations to give up on God, give up on meaningful life? Will you linger longer, lost without direction? Instead of walking through the wilderness – will you get stuck there – bereft of direction and hope? Too many are floundering in their wilderness – instead of getting on with it, and walking through the wilderness! In your wilderness, what metal are you of? God is enquiring. You need to know!

Jesus has just been baptized. He has gone through the rolling water, reminiscent of his people's earlier journey out of slavery and through the water to deliverance. His baptism is a sign, a marker for his life. It was an outward event, to mark his inward, spiritual journey's commencement. God, the divine, the inner self, legitimizes this journey.

Did you notice in Matthew's story that it was none other than The Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness? It is even stronger in Mark's account of this story. Mark declares, "The Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness..." The Spirit drove him into the wilderness! Matthew lightens up - probably for the Presbyterians. No matter what - The Spirit guides Jesus to where he needs to go - the wilderness. That place of testing. That desolate place of possibilities. That place of character building. Jesus had reached the age to where he had to enter his wilderness, to walk through the wilderness! Just for a time mind you, not to linger any longer than necessary.

Jesus must pass through the water and on the other side is the wilderness. He must go through separation. He is on his own. His inner self is being formed. It is initiation time! The wilderness initiates those who withstand the temptations who learn of, and about life. There are those times when the daily affairs, the mundane recede and each of us individually are led, driven, by the Spirit into the wilderness!

Without the wilderness, there is immaturity. There is no depth of one's soul. The wilderness is where your character is built; is borne in the crucible of life. Recognize it is the Spirit that leads you into the wilderness. In the wilderness Satan the Tempter goes to work. Define Satan as personal or metaphorical as you like, but recognize the power of the temptations in your life! Recognize the learning, the maturity that you must imbibe - take into your soul, your character.

Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights. The priority here is one's soul, spirit. Character is being developed. Just who are you? What are your limits? What are your strengths?

And after fasting Jesus was hungry. (I would have been eating the bark off the "burning bush!") When the senses are starved the temptations intrude themselves.

The Tempter comes to Jesus: "Hey, Jesus (you've lost weight). If you are who you say you are command these stones to become loaves of bread. Wouldn't this smooth stone make a delightful hard crusted French baguette? How about that piece of slate? Matzoh here I come!?"

Jesus; hungry, starving, alone in the wilderness responds; "There are some things more important than bread, than satiating my physical hunger."

This is not an excuse to neglect the hungry. Instead - this declaration is a testament to the belief - that we humans are more than our physical appetites! Again, not that our physical appetites are evil, or unspiritual, or suspect.

But - we are more!!

The test. Will you eclipse your values by selling yourself short, selling your soul, - for a piece of bread? For a test? For a few dollars? For a broken fender?

Is life summed up, with a filled belly?

Jesus declared - No!

There are values that transcend bread! Desire!

This inward journey.

Too many of us are functional Nihilists! “What’s it matter? Nothing really matters anyway!” How horrible – how empty!

Do you live imbibing Jesus, Athens, Shakespeare, T. S. Elliot, Rembrandt...?

Or do you:

- settle for a piece of bread?!
- a bowl of porridge?
- Have you been selling yourself short?
- Too few ever make it past this first temptation.

The tempter takes Jesus to Mt. Everest (perhaps); shows him all the world and says, “It’s yours! All you need to do is worship me! It’s that simple!”

“Jesus - there are no limits! Defy gravity-jump and tempt your father to protect you! Break the rules set down in the universe!”

The temptation is for one to be filled with so much hubris - unhealthy pride that one feels the rules of the universe need not apply to them.

And Jesus would not have it!

From Goethe's Faust, to Shelly's Frankenstein this human hubris has been exposed. There are limits! You can't have it all! You shouldn't have it all!

- “You shall not tempt the Lord your God!”
- Well, perhaps the third times the charm.

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Power is the issue! A very human desire. Really who of us would not wish more power? At home? At work? At school?

These temptations are perennial! They change cultural clothes, take on new accouterments but continue to tempt, and too often destroy. Beware the Tempter does not trick you here. For the quest for wisdom includes appropriating power. All power is not evil, nor wrong. In fact we need people, moral creative people to wield power. For if such do not step forward the vacuum will be filled with the likes of Stalin, Hitler and Bin Laden.

But, in wielding power one must have a vision of something greater than him or her self.

Jesus declares:

“Only God is worthy of worship!”

“Only a vision that upholds values of love and justice is worthy!”

The tempter takes Jesus to step three. “You see how high up we are? Throw yourself down from here. For surely the angels will catch you. They will protect you. After all, you are God’s son.”

“Jesus – there are no limits! Defy gravity – jump and tempt your father to protect you! Break the rules set down in the universe!”

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“You shall not tempt the Lord your God!”

Be the best biologist you can be!

Be the best businesswoman possible!

Be the best teacher, professor, secretary, physician, waiter, computer analyst, whatever vocation you practice!

Take that power within yourself to excel, to succeed!

But, beware the temptation to fail to hold a greater vision beyond yourself. Beware, as you walk through the wilderness!

The Tempter failed. Jesus passed the test, and he walked through and out of the wilderness. The wilderness is a place “to pass through” not to live in. Realize, you pass through the wilderness – you do not live there. You have been tempted in your wilderness in many ways. Perhaps the greatest 21st century temptation is to give up on God, on life.

You've dealt with issue after issue – but too much evil has sapped your strength.

My friends – Never! Never! Does the Lord of the universe leave you alone in your wilderness! No matter how dark your wilderness – trust in God! Journey together! Embrace a meaningful universe! With head held high walk through your wilderness, and exit the wilderness stronger and more inspired to live your life!

Amen.