

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13

Every season of Lent begins in the wilderness, a place most of us try to avoid. But Barbara Brown Taylor, priest and scholar, says the wilderness is one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be.¹

Life changing. Wilderness. Wild-ness. Perhaps the wildest part of wilderness is that it is where we meet us.

Barbara Brown Taylor asks a few questions about Jesus and his experience of wilderness: How did he end up there? *The Spirit led him*. What filled him? *He was filled with 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? *Famished*.

But that long stretch in the wilderness freed him. Jesus was freed from hungry cravings for all the stuff in our daily lives that do not satisfy. Here's a sentence you would think was written yesterday: "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room." That was written about 400 years ago by philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. Let me put it in inclusive language: "The sole cause of human unhappiness is that we do not know how to stay quietly in our rooms." Today, our world is filled with more distractions and intoxicating trivia than at any other time in history. Distraction is addicting.

That long stretch in the wilderness freed Jesus from the distractions even in his life. It was cleansing. Purifying. He put aside all noise – both external and internal. He put worry on pause. There was nothing to fear – although there were certainly dangers – but he had few needs. It sounds idyllic, doesn't it?

The long sojourn in the wilderness also freed Jesus from all the temptations to dilute his purpose and meaning. Distraction does that to us. Sit down to do your taxes and see how quickly you're tempted to check email, call a friend, or play Angry Birds on your cellphone.

Jesus confronts the wilderness temptations and conquers them. This reveals his utter trust in God. Utter reliance. Even so, says theologian Karl Barth, Jesus will live in the company of evil for the rest of his life. This is *the frontier of evil*, where Jesus is subject to constant warfare.

The Pharisees tempt him to prove his power. His mother tempts him to put ties to her before his calling. His disciples tempt him to the point of despair with their inconstancy: they doubt; they lack understanding; they fall asleep in the night of his vigil; they deny and betray at the time of his death. The temptation must have been great to give up on these disciples – these friends.

¹ Quoted in Synthesis, a sermons-help publication, for Sunday, 2/14/2016; PNMSI Publishing Co., Boyds, MD.

Jesus entered into these temptations voluntarily. He felt their full force. In each case he turned his face toward God and put his life's outcome in God's hands.²

The ability to do this came of wilderness training. "After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust the Spirit who had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else."³

Lent is a time when we seek that clarity and grit through forms of self-denial that only we can dictate. No one imposes Lent on us. Yes, the Church invites and makes space for. But we don't "do" Lent for the Church or even for God. We do Lent for us.

"On her speaking tours in the United States, Mother Teresa was always quick to point out that the obscene abundance of the West fostered malnourished souls."⁴ These are souls who lack clarity, grit, and depth. Lent is the time to set aside other things and tend the starving soul grossly malnourished by abundance.

The wilderness taunt to turn stones into bread is a temptation to indulge in abundance; to live by our appetites; to be governed by our lower drives for pleasure and comfort. To counter this temptation – this force – that bedevils us who are malnourished by having too much, Jesus offers a corrective. He says what gives us life is "every word that comes from the mouth of God." Our true life consists in what comes from God.

The wilderness seduction to jump off a high place without harm is the temptation to believe in one's invincibility. It is the temptation to believe in one's self ultimately. It is a form of atheism. You can see the myth of invincibility exposed as the lie it is at the funeral of any teenage driver who didn't wear a seat belt, or who drove under the influence. The myth of invincibility also entices those of us who are older and wiser when we live beyond our means or compete to keep up with those who have more.

To this Jesus says don't kid yourself. Don't play with fire. Or in the lexicon of scripture: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

The temptation to worship falsehood is universal, showing no discrimination based on age, gender, or status. It is the inducement to be preoccupied with things that don't satisfy. We tend to glorify false gods who take; they don't give. They drain us; they malnourish us. To this temptation Jesus says love God. Worship the Lord.

² Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, p. 69; found online at: <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/lent1c.html>

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Ibid.*

⁴ <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/lent1c.html>

“When Jesus went into the wilderness, he fasted; he left behind everything else one needs for bare existence. Through this hard act; this denial of all comfort; through the solitude and abandonment of the desert and everything else that involves denial of the world and all earthly company – through all these he proclaims that only one thing is necessary.

“He proclaims that I be with God, that I find God, and that everything else, no matter how great or beautiful is secondary and subordinate and must even be sacrificed, if needs be, to this ultimate movement of heart and spirit.

“When Jesus came out of the wilderness, he had in the depths of his being that which is the first and last duty of humankind: find God, see God; belong to God even to the exclusion of everything else that makes up human life.”⁵

⁵ Karl Rahner, The Great Church Year, found online at: <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/lent1c.html>