

## **"Can God Spread a Table In The Wilderness?"**

(Psalm 78:9-25; Romans 8:35, 37-39; Mark 1:9-15)

The Prophet Jeremiah described the wilderness as "a land of deserts and pits...a land of drought and deep darkness...a land that no one passes through, where no one lives" (Jeremiah 2:6). The Psalmist talked about the wilderness as a lonesome place where you wander, alone and lost, through wasteland, finding no inhabited town, hungry and thirsty, with your soul fainting within you (Psalm 107:4-9). Originally the wilderness was the term used to describe a couple of actual areas in the Holy Land. One wilderness was in the Negev, Transjordan, and the Sinai. This was where the Hebrews wandered after their miraculous escape from Egypt. Deuteronomy refers to it as "the great and terrible wilderness." Another wilderness was on the eastern slopes of the Judean mountains in the rain shadow leading down to the Dead Sea. This was where David fled and hid when he was running away from King Saul. And, this was also the place to which Jesus withdrew in our gospel lesson for this first Sunday of the Season of Lent.

The Gospel Writer Mark recorded that as soon as Jesus was baptized, "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:12-13). It seems that the later gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, took Mark's version of Jesus' time in the wilderness and elaborated on the story by lifting up specific temptations Jesus experienced. But in all three versions of Jesus' wilderness experience, there's a lot of symbolism going on. For by this time in Jewish history, the wilderness had become synonymous for a difficult time of life, a time in your life when you feel alone, lost, hungry and thirsty for you-know-not-what, a time when you feel torn each way by all sorts of wild beasts that could destroy you. Also, the number 40 is symbolic of a time of preparation. So, in all three gospel accounts, the message is the same: after Jesus was baptized, he found himself alone, tempted, faced with tough choices, torn about how to proceed; nonetheless, this difficult time in the wilderness was necessary to prepare Jesus for his ministry.

The experience of our Lord is an experience that we're all well familiar with, isn't it? Seems like every new accomplishment or milestone in our lives just presents us with more challenges. When we're young, we can't wait to grow up—to be independent—to make our own decisions. Then, we think, everything will be wonderful! But when we actually get to that point in our lives, we find that we're not in a beautiful oasis, as we thought we'd be, but rather in a barren wasteland, faced with tough decisions about our very survival. And so it goes. Throughout our lives, sure, there are times spent in a beautiful oasis, but there are also

intermittent times of wilderness wandering for each of us. So what can we learn from our Lord's experience in the wilderness? What can we learn that will sustain us in our wilderness wandering?

First, we can learn that even for Jesus, after the high of baptism and hearing God bless him, he suddenly found himself driven into the wasteland. So, too, we need to expect that the same will from time to time happen to us. Even after something good happens to us, maybe because something good happens to us, we may suddenly find ourselves jettisoned from a high point to a low point. We may feel lost and helpless. We may feel empty. We may lose our job. We may suffer betrayal. We need to expect such wilderness times, for they're part of the journeys of our lives. Harry Emerson Fosdick was one of the greatest American preachers of the 20th century. Few people know that as a young seminary student he reached the breaking point after working one summer in city mission work. He went home and was overcome by such deep depression that he stood in the bathroom with a straight razor to his throat, thinking about taking his own life. And do you remember how shocked everyone was a few years ago to hear that even saintly Mother Theresa suffered from doubt and depression? But Mother Theresa's as well as Harry Emerson Fosdick's "Dark Night of the Soul," as theologians have often labeled the experience of wilderness wandering, is a normal part of our faith walk. When one person was told this, he remarked, "Oh, how I wish someone had told me about this before. I wish that I had known it was a normal experience when I was going through it."

Second, we can learn from Jesus' time in the wilderness, that there's a purpose for those difficult times of our lives: it is through the various temptations that come to us in the wildernesses of our lives that we are formed. One of my favorite posters says, "Life is a test. It is only a test. Had this been a real life, you would have been instructed where to go and what to do." But, seriously, it's our wilderness experiences that help us mature as human beings and as God's servants. The Israelites were also in the wilderness for a purpose--the purpose of learning what it meant to live in a covenant relationship with God. And Jesus was in the wilderness for a purpose--the purpose of deciding how he would carry on his ministry—for example, whether he would do it by wowing the people with miracles or by giving the people what they wanted. "Jesus grew up in the wilderness. He listened to his inner voices, he reached back for the blessings of his past, he examined his motives, and then, when he finally understood who God

had called him to be--he moved back out into the world, ready to serve."<sup>1</sup> Jesus didn't run away from testing. He was willing to come face to face with temptations, to listen to them, to think about them, and then, having confronted them and recognized them for what they were, he made them get behind him. In other words, he was then done and finished with them, so that they wouldn't keep coming back to plague him.

There are so many temptations that come to us in our wilderness wanderings. D.L. Moody said that "Temptations are never so dangerous as when they come to us in a religious garb." Others have said that there are two primary temptations: 1) Just once won't hurt. 2) Now that you have ruined your life, you are beyond God's use, and might as well enjoy sinning. But, when we're in our wilderness wandering, unhappy with our lot in life, another common temptation is thinking that we're less-than, not worthy, that we don't measure up. In C.S. Lewis' imaginative book The Screwtape Letters, the senior demon gives instructions to his nephew Wormwood about how to undermine Christians. The senior demon writes, "Dear Wormwood: Just get them on the merry-go-round of seeking approval. They'll never get off and thus never get far. They'll be plagued by the thoughts of their unworthiness and never find purpose." When we feel as if there's no purpose in our lives, even when we feel that there's no purpose for our despair and depression, we need to remember that such testings are really opportunities for self-discovery and spiritual maturity. Such testings might bring to light the weaknesses in our character that needed to be strengthened.

Third, we can learn from how Jesus handled his time in the wilderness how we are to handle ours. Jesus kept his focus on God and remembering that he belonged to God. This gave him the grounding to make the right choices. The insightful spiritual writer Henri Nouwen maybe gave us a clue as to how Jesus was able to do this. Henri Nouwen named one of his books The Beloved. How firmly Jesus must have held onto those words of God, those words he heard at his baptism, when he was in the wilderness: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Knowing that God says the same to us can sustain us as well. With our eyes on God, we too can make good choices—we too can resist selling out to fear, pride, and thinking that the end result justifies the means. When Martin Luther was in difficulty, he had the habit of saying to himself or to others, "I am

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<sup>1</sup>"Grown Up Religion" by Susan R. Andrews Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church Bethesda, MD

baptized." We need to remember that's who we are. We're the beloved of God. We're the ones he loved enough to die for.

In The Silver Chair, the sixth book in The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis showed us the importance of remembering whose we are when we're confronted with demon thoughts. In the story, two children, Jill and Eustace, are joined by a Marsh-wiggle named Puddleglum. Now remember, Narnia is a magical land ruled over by Aslan, the great lion who truly loves and wants to take care of all living creatures. Aslan, of course, is symbolic of the Lord. But back to the story, after successfully saving Prince Rilian, the heir to the throne of Narnia, Jill and Eustace find themselves confronted by a very tempting witch. The witch thinks that if she can just get them to forget who they are, she'll be able to cast a spell over them and get them to do whatever she wants them to do, to become her servants instead of the servants of Aslan. As if hypnotized, the children begin reciting the words of the witch, slowly believing her lies, forgetting their own lives and the truth as they have known it. It seems hopeless, when suddenly, Jill remembers something. As C.S. Lewis phrased it, "Jill had been feeling that there was something she must remember at all costs. And now she did. But it was dreadfully hard to say it. She felt as if huge weights were laid on her lips. At last, with an effort that seemed to take all the good out of her, she said: 'There's Aslan.'" And with the name "Aslan," the evil spell began to weaken. The children remembered Aslan. They remembered who they were and whose they were. Similarly, it's easy for us to forget who we are. Not only during the difficult times of our lives, but just in our out-in-the-world day-to-day living. Everything we do, whether it is having a party in the privacy of our own homes or responding in the work place to someone who has betrayed us can well be viewed as a wilderness temptation. Will we succumb to the temptation and behave in a worldly, less-than-godly fashion? Or, will we remember the Lord, our baptisms, and that we are his? Jesus undoubtedly kept his focus on God, and so must we.

Fourth, when we are faced with wilderness wandering, we must remember that God is with us. When Jesus was in the wilderness, set upon by temptations, by all sorts of wild beasts, the divine love and power were with him all the time. So too, God is with us. Harold Kushner has written, "For responsible religious adults, God is not the authority telling them what to do. God is the divine power urging them to grow, to reach, to dare. When God speaks to such people, God does not say, as one would to a child, 'I will be watching you to make sure you don't do anything wrong.' He says rather, 'Go forth into an uncharted world where you have never

been before, struggle to find your path, but no matter what happens, know that I will be with you."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, as today's gospel lesson reminds us, God is not only with us. He will care for us. God has the power and the compassion to bring miraculous blessings even during our wilderness wandering. In Psalm 78, the Psalmist asked a rhetorical question: "Can God Spread a Table In the Wilderness?" And, of course, the answer is yes! For 40 years, God fed the hungry Hebrews in the wilderness with manna every day. And our scripture for today points out that God's angels waited on Jesus in the wilderness. Can God spread a table in the wilderness? Of course. Can God spread a table in the wilderness for us—for you and for me? Of course. No matter how bad things can get, when we're thirsty and hungry and lost and despairing, let us remember that such suffering comes to all and can be a time of spiritual growth, if we will keep our focus on God and remember that he is with us and will abundantly care for us. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 1, 2009

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<sup>2</sup>Kushner, Harold, When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough, p. 132