

## “Wilderness Time”

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 & Luke 4:1-13

It was time for Jesus to get started...At about thirty years of age, just as he begins his “work,” (Lk 3: 23), Jesus takes a side trip. Jesus has just recently been baptized in the Jordan River, hearing that voice from heaven say “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3:22). Now we get to learn more about how Jesus sorts out what those words might mean for him. This is part of Luke’s theological portrait of Jesus, presenting three important possibilities for his ministry, drawn from his Jewish religious tradition. (S. Ringe, *Feasting, Yr C*, vol 2:p 45)

### READ TEXT

Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is drawn by that same Spirit, into the wilderness, to the desert spaces that surrounded the towns where Jesus lived and taught. Jesus has already had his initial visionary experience down in the water with John the Baptist. And in order to reinforce the point, the writer includes a reverse genealogy, tracking the lineage of Jesus, the alleged “son of Joseph” all the way Jesus back to Adam, “son of God.” Son of Joseph and now beloved Son of God with a capital “S”, Jesus now has work to do, but it’s not what you think. Jesus isn’t heading for the nearest mountainside for an inaugural speech, or charging into the local synagogue to turn things upside-down; he’s not turning loaves and fishes into feasts, not yet anyways. There’s something else that needs to happen first, something essential to Jesus’ own self-understanding about his mission and direction.

We might call to mind the experience of other cultures, particularly the Native American experience, where a person on the very of adulthood goes off alone on a vision quest to find a name and an identity. One description of a First People’s vision quest goes like this:

...Those of us on a...Vision Quest believe we are put on this earth for a special reason, but that reason is not always clear to us. We want to know what we need to accomplish in life for our highest benefit, and in turn, the benefit of the world. The quest can reveal our life’s purpose, but it is an arduous journey into the core of our being that we should only embark upon with sincerity. ( <http://native-americans-online.com/native-american-vision-quest.html> )

Jesus has already had that visionary moment. He knows about the reasons he’s been put on this earth, and now in early adulthood, our text is about Jesus entering a wilderness time of “testing.” This word for testing is sometimes also translated as “temptation,” but as commentator Sharon Ringe points out, “these are not ‘temptations’ to do things that are desirable but not good for him (like our ‘temptation’ to each an extra piece of cake). Rather these are tests to see whether even good things can lure Jesus from a focus on God’s will...” (*Feasting:46*)

Barbara Brown Taylor, in writing about Lent, uses Jesus’ 40 day wilderness test, alongside examples of other 40 day biblical references – Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness, Elijah’s 40 days on the mountain after hearing the still, small voice of God, along with Moses’ 40 days on that same mountain, listening to God give the law - to describe our season of Lent as 40 days of preparation, much like an “Outward Bound for the soul:”

No one has to sign up for it, but if you do then you give up the illusion that you are in control of your life. You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to do foolhardy things, like walk backwards over a precipice with nothing but a rope around your waist, or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these are the real test... the real test comes when you go “solo.” [You are put] out all by yourself in the middle of

nowhere...for the next 24 hours. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you really fear. (*Home By Another Way*. Cowley, 1999:66-67)

Jesus' focus on God's will during his 40 day "solo" is sorely tested with the use of these three challenges: To feed the hungry; to rule the world with justice, and to serve God in faithfulness. None of these are bad things – all of them seem especially suited to Jesus and his ministry of service, and kin-dom creating, and religious leadership or authority. Of course Jesus is going to be cast by the gospel writers as a new Moses, bringing his own manna for the feeding the many hungry people in a land often wracked by famine, one where most folks were struggling to find enough to get by with under the weight of Roman occupiers. But the sustenance Jesus provides comes not by turning stones to bread...not this time.

Yes, of course, the Adversary's assumption, that he is the "ruler of the world," able to offer the governance of all the world's kingdoms is false, but perhaps the Devil – or "Adversary" in Hebrew - can lure Jesus into honoring that alleged power, in order to gain Jesus' allegiance. In reply, Jesus is clear, the price is too high; all authority already belongs to God. Even if regime change away from the great Roman empire would be a welcome change, it would come at the great risk of serving someone other than God.

And finally, when Jesus is swept up to Jerusalem, where he will one day conclude his ministry and enter his passion and experience resurrection, the Adversary's challenge is issued using the words of Psalm 91 (yes, the Devil can quote Scripture): Test this promise of God's protection, says the Devil, 'No,' says Jesus, 'do not put the Lord your God to the test,' quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. Jesus remains faithful to the call and purposes of God for his life.

Of course, with hindsight, we are aware that Luke's account of Jesus' earthly ministry and future passion, recalls these three tests he has undergone: Commentator Ringe notes once again, that Jesus' focus on doing God's will involved feeding the hungry (Luke 9), and his was a deep commitment to the proclamation of God's empire of justice and peace, which was often the focus of his preaching and teaching. And although Jesus refused to jump off the temple to see if God would send rescue angels, Jesus goes to the cross, believing that God's ultimate purpose for life will win out over the world's decision to execute him; that refusing to test God now, means the chance to accept and defeat death later on. (Ringe, p. 49 & NIB vol 9, *Luke-John*, p. 100)

So what exactly was going on with Jesus' 40 days of wilderness time? Was it an "Outward Bound" for the soul, a chance for Jesus to see what he was made of, a dramatic clash of self-awareness vs. self-destructive temptations? Was this a part of a spiritual retreat gone bad, a Spirit-led sojourn which led to a walk on the wild side of spiritual consciousness? Did Jesus have to stand his ground in the face of the Adversary, to beat the Devil at his own game, in order to send the Evil One away "until an opportune time" described much later in Luke's gospel? Did Jesus have an experience of Lent?

These challenges in the wilderness, are certainly a familiar part of the human condition: we are universally tempted and tested, and as such, if Jesus has not been tested, he would not have really been fully human. This 40 day struggle is definitely an essential part of the New Testament writers' understanding of who Jesus was: Jesus was fully human, "in every respect tested as we are, yet without sin" as the writer of Hebrews puts in (4:15). But I think there's more:

When Jesus is faced with pressing decisions about his identity and vocation, about being the "Beloved Son of God," filled with the Spirit and preparing to proclaim that the reign of God has begun at his home-town synagogue at Nazareth in the very next portion of chapter 4, he is able to stand firm: He is led by the Spirit and not by the Adversary. He has relied on the word of God in the Scriptures as he knew them at that time, affirming God's purpose for his life of Son-ship as well as the call to worship and to serve God. (NIB 100-101) Jesus was confronted with a situation in which

that hollowness inside each of us as human beings, that place we sometime feel as a space that needs to be filled by something greater than ourselves, could have been filled by un-holy promises. Like the Faustian Bargain, based on the life of a 16<sup>th</sup> century German magician who claimed to be in league with the Devil, one can sell one's soul to Satan in exchange for great powers, but at the end of the agreed upon time, the deal is up and the Devil takes possession of that soul forever. (NIB:101) Or else, as Professor Brown Taylor writes, in her sermon entitled "Lenten Discipline," we have some choices about what this empty space means:

That hollowness... is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying... To enter the wilderness is to leave [our pacifiers] behind, [whether it is eating, shopping, blaming, or taking care of other people.] (Ibid.p 68)

Entering into the wilderness time of Lent, involves a conscious decision about whose you will be and how you will be filled: After the example of Jesus, we are called worship the Lord your God, and serve no one else. We need to expect great things from God and from ourselves. This is a time we are called out to believe that everything is possible. (Ibid. 97-98) During Lent we have the chance to differentiate between doing goods because they are possible and doing the goods we are called to do. Can we surrender to God's intention for our lives by following the path of our greatest aliveness? This often means we've got to move off the path of common wisdom and certainty, to start following a path staked out for us by God who offers a higher calling of purposefulness in the service and worship of God. (cf. E. Elnes, *Gifts of the Darkwood* "The Gift of Temptation," pp. 116-118) This is how Jesus used his wilderness time; and it carried him right into that bold declaration of his mission and purpose: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."

How might you and I use our 40 days of Lenten sojourn? Show up in worship for a series on the questions Jesus asked, starting next week. Join in our Weds. night series, "Lent and the Arts." Be purposeful in claiming space to explore what you believe and what you still need to learn. Take time to focus on the things you might be called to defend or redefine. Let go of what holds you back; fill the emptiness with God's peace. Fast and pray. Amen.

### **References**

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