

March 10, 2019 (Focus: Luke 4:1-13)

Usually when I usually hear the term “wilderness” I think about a dense forest. I guess that has a lot to do with the fact that I have lived all my life in the northern half of this country. When I think of wilderness, I imagine sometimes getting a glimpse of hills stretching on for miles and miles, not a sign of civilization in sight, but most of the time in wilderness would be under the canopy of the trees, everywhere one looks there would be trees. I think in that sort of wilderness, with signs of life all around, with sources of water and food (if you know what to look for), it wouldn't be so hard to spend 40 days wandering, enjoying the peace and quiet, thinking about one's place in a creation that is so lush and beautiful that it's not difficult to believe that God is very good indeed and be inspired. This is the sort of place that people often talk about where they can feel “spiritual” more so than inside four walls. Yes, one has to watch out for bears and for poison ivy, but for the most part one could really have a reasonably decent if not simply wonderful retreat in that sort of wilderness.

But Jesus' wilderness journey was in all likelihood in a much starker, much more physically demanding place, in one of the desert wilderness areas of 1st century Palestine. Having been in Arizona recently, even though it was just the desert in the winter and not the desert of the blazing hot summer sun, gives me a little more appreciation for this story of Jesus in the wilderness. The desert is a harsh sort of place, sandy and rocky and uneven terrain, some scrub brush but hardly a bit of canopy to protect one from the unrelenting sun.

To spend time in the forest contemplating one's place in life, and one's vocation, would seem like an opportunity to open oneself up to the possibilities, to imagine all the wonderful things one can do. To spend time in the desert contemplating one's vocation and one's place in life seems more like flirting with danger, physical danger yes, but also mental danger. All that endless sky open up to you, all that dangerous terrain, and no comfortable space to sit or lay one's head – it seems like such a wilderness of conflict and discomfort would open up all sorts of thoughts, negative thoughts, that could eat away at a person in such solitude.

It is not surprising that the voice of Satan shows up in this story; our demons show up often when we are stressed. Demons not as a pitchfork carrying, split tail, horns on head person who does evil, but demons as in inner demons, as those things we carry within – envy, for example, or greed, or self-loathing or a feeling of worthlessness. As Henry David Thoreau once said,

"Generally speaking, a howling wilderness does not howl: it is the imagination of the traveler that does the howling."

Our inner demons show up often when we are most vulnerable. Those inner voices that say that others mean us harm, or that no one cares. Those inner voices that say we are not worthy. Those inner voices that try to give excuses for our worst natures, like holding grudges or assuming the worst in a situation, things that break relationships and keep us apart from others. Those inner voices that, for the most part, did not originate with us, but were somehow taught to us by words but more often insinuated by the actions of others, sometime even those we are most closely related to or who supposedly love us. Those voices who would actually try to convince us that we are not a child of God, that we are not someone who could trust in God to be with us, especially in the wilderness-like places where life sometimes takes us.

And like the devil in our gospel story today, these voices can sometimes even use scripture, proof texting to point out how we should have a very different opinion of ourselves or do a very different thing than what God intends for us, and like Jesus we have to fight back by looking at the whole picture of who God is and who we are as God's people.

Inner demons, inner voices that say we are not worthy – these can lead to us trying to compensate by chasing after other demons, false gods that will not truly feed us. Those people we both despise but maybe secretly admire just a tad because they seem so full of confidence, have lots of money or things or seem to have lots of friends and life seems so easy for them, well their good spirits are often times only false bravado.

Henri Nouwen: "Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions....Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.' Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."

For Jesus shows us a different way – no matter how bad things are, no matter how bad the wilderness seems, no matter how famished for bread and hope we seem to be, we can stay true to our faith in a better way. Instead of thinking that God's love is so limited that only a select few are chosen, we can affirm that God has set a banquet before us where there is room for all, including ourselves.

When we think of God's love as limited in amount or scope, well, scarcity breeds fear. Trust in God breeds integrity of word and actions. Hope in the abundant love and grace that God provides breeds love of neighbor and of self.

Giving into temptation is all about filling the empty places inside with something other than God. The thing we forget is that the empty places inside are not truly empty, for no matter what wilderness place we are in, God is with us. The story of Jesus in the wilderness is a reminder to us: the wilderness does not belong to the devil. The wilderness is not God-forsaken. The wilderness is also God's home. God's Spirit is there, within us and beside us. It may take some work for us to truly feel that God is within us and beside us always, that God loves all creation, including us, but that's why they call them spiritual practices. And if we cannot feel that spirit inside of us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far away, with enough in him to sustain us, enough to make us brave and faithful.

Let us pray. Help us, Gracious God, in our search for more spiritual richness in our lives. Help us to look inward, and to see where maybe we have been believing in and following the wrong voices. Help us to listen for your voice, a voice of love and grace, and yes, even, a voice of challenge. When it feels as if our inner light has grown dim, help us rekindle it by trusting that you are always giving us the fuel we truly need. May your Spirit continue to grow in us, helping us to live, truly live. Amen.

One way to think of Lent, then, might be as a spiritual fitness program. No single dimension is enough, for what is required is a whole-life effort to be more loving, more trusting, more courageous, more humble, yes, but also *lighter* (as in *less burdened*), more hopeful, more filled with joy.

If, for example, we're carrying a grudge, our load will be lighter if we let it go - a very different kind of thing to give up. If we are preoccupied with material things - food, our car, our house, for example, including worry about all three - we could set our minds to other things: giving an extraordinarily generous gift to another, or seeing things from another's perspective (which really takes willpower, and is a great spiritual practice).

Handout

40 Days – 40 Things

There are 40 days in Lent (March 6 – April 20, except the Sundays). Every day in Lent, find one thing in your house/garage/tool shed/car that you no longer need (for example, clothes, toys, sports equipment, kitchen stuff, ...) and put it in a bag or box. At the end of Lent, donate what you collect to a local thrift store. Make the things you “give up” things that are clean and in good shape and that someone might be able to use. Clear space in your life, and help others!



What to Give Up...

Give up complaining ...	focus on Gratitude
Give up pessimism ...	become an Optimist
Give up worry ...	trust Divine Providence
Give up bitterness ...	turn to Forgiveness
Give up hatred ...	return Good for evil
Give up negativism ...	be Positive
Give up anger ...	be More Patient
Give up pettiness ...	become Mature
Give up gloom ...	enjoy the Beauty all around you
Give up jealousy ...	pray for Trust
Give up gossiping ...	control your Tongue
Give up sin ...	turn to Virtue
Give up giving up ...	Hang in there!