

With Jesus In The Wilderness

Luke 4:1-13

This is not exactly camping season. Nevertheless, over the six weeks of Lent we are going into the wilderness as we prepare for Easter Sunday.

You don't get to the Promised Land without first going through the wilderness.

Notice that immediately after Jesus' baptism, when he heard the voice of God say, "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased . . ." we read these words, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished . . ."

Time spent in the wilderness seems to be a prerequisite for a deep experience of faith. God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, where they had lived in slavery for 400 years. They headed toward the Promised Land. It was an 11-day journey, but it took them 40 years to get there.

Why did God keep them wandering in the wilderness? Even when Joshua took over and led them into Canaan, it was many years before they subdued it. And even when they were in the promised land and had subdued it, they could not keep it. There came a time when they were carried off into slavery in Babylon where they cried out, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137:4)

Our faith is a wilderness faith. It was born in struggle and hardship. Why was Jesus driven out into the wilderness before he began his formal ministry? Probably it was so that he could fully experience what it means to be a human being. Authentic faith is not handed to us on a silver platter. Authentic faith is born in the wilderness of testing and temptation.

A writer once told of visiting an orange grove where an irrigation pump had broken down. Because the season was unusually dry, some of the trees were beginning to die for lack of water.

The man giving the tour then took the writer to his own orchard where irrigation was used sparingly. He said, "These trees could go without rain for another 2 weeks. You see, when they were young, I frequently kept the water from them. This hardship caused them to send their roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture at a greater depth.

Some parents are surprised when they make life as easy as possible for their children and then discover that those children do not respond in the way that the parents had hoped. Here is one of life's most important secrets: There is something about struggle that toughens us, matures us.

Time spent in the wilderness seems to be a prerequisite for a deep faith. If life comes too easily, if there are no challenges to overcome, no mountains to be scaled, then we live on the surface of life with no real understanding of God's love and God's sustaining power.

Jesus was driven out into the wilderness. There he was tested, as you and I are tested in our daily lives. There seems no other way to do it. No pain, no gain.

He was not lured into the wilderness by the Tempter. He was driven there by the Spirit. Evidently the wilderness was exactly where he was supposed to be.

I want to say a hard thing to you. People of faith always struggle with the question, "Why is there evil in the world?" Why does God permit us to suffer? Our stock answer is that God does not cause our suffering, but God can use our suffering to make us into the image of God's Son. I believe it is entirely consistent with the teachings of Jesus. "God sends God's rain on the just and the unjust . . ." (Matthew 5:45) God does not pick out individual people and say to them, "I'm going to cause you unimaginable suffering to make you a better person. If you are in pain this day, I do not believe God caused it. God does not work that way."

However, God did create this world in which suffering is very much a part of our environment. That says to me that suffering has its place in God's overall plan. Some hardships, some adversity seems to be necessary for spiritual growth. Of course, people respond to their wilderness experiences in different ways.

Life in the wilderness is not easy. It is filled with tests and temptations. People respond to these tests and temptations in different ways. Some give up their faith. Some sell their souls for bread. Some settle for a life of material comfort while remaining spiritually poor. Each of us has a choice in how we will respond to life.

I read a powerful story recently, told by an Australian pastor.

It took place in Russia at the end of World War II. The Russians were marching German prisoners of war back to Germany. Ordinary Russian people lined the streets by the thousands to see the spectacle. Remember, no nation suffered more casualties in WWII than Soviet Russia. Conservative estimates are that 40 million Russians died as a result of the war. One could not possibly imagine the feelings of these ordinary Russian people as the German soldiers were marched in front of them. A chorus of hatred, heckles and jeers permeated the scene. First came the German officers, relatively well fed, in their uniforms, marching in step, able to keep a semblance of dignity and respect. The Russian people had no problem sustaining their hatred of them.

But after a while the vast bulk of prisoners appeared, the ordinary German foot soldiers. They could hardly march at all, let alone in step. They were emaciated, with few clothes, truly humiliated, wretched, gaunt, pitiful creatures. The jeers and abuse stopped. There was a hush over the crowd. Then finally a couple of elderly Russian women, from the margins, broke through to these ghostly figures and held out crusts of bread. The bread was gratefully and eagerly accepted and soon many other ordinary Russian bystanders were moving amongst the columns of German prisoners with offerings of bread. It became so overwhelming that the Russian guards could not stop the crowd . . . Somehow, those ordinary Russian people were moved with an unconditional love that revealed to them that their enemies were simply other people's children who were lost, hungry and needing to go home.

No one would have blamed these Russian people if they had spat in the faces of the German soldiers who had brought so much suffering to their land. But these men and women made another choice. How you deal with your wilderness experiences reveals what you are inside. Some people have gone through the wilderness and lost their faith. Others have moved through the wilderness and found a closeness to God and to others that they've never known before--a faith they would not have discovered any other way.

The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where he was tested. He passed that test. So can we. It will not be easy, but it can be done. Time spent in the wilderness is a prerequisite for a deep experience of faith. God has a place for the wilderness, not that we shall stay there, but that we shall move through the wilderness and, in doing so, experience new faith, new hope, new love. Are you in the wilderness? By the grace of God you can make it through.