

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lent rolls around every year, but for most Christians, it is less like a birthday and more like a flu vaccination. It is hard to explain to our non-Christian friends, because, to tell the truth, we do not fully understand it ourselves. We engage in its practice without ever asking why we are doing what we are doing. We do it because, well, we have always done it. We cut out chocolate, lay off the red meat, maybe we stop drinking carbonated beverages for forty days, all to declare ourselves better prepared for the resurrection. To an outsider, it looks more like a diet.

Every year when the first Sunday of Lent arrives, we watch as Jesus wanders off into the wilderness again. Of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke are the only two who go into any detail about what the devil said and what Jesus said back. What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs to put Jesus to the test, but Jesus knows more than what the Bible says. Jesus knows how to DO what the Bible says, which is how he passes his wilderness exam.

Every time, Jesus is offered more...more bread, more power, more protection...and Jesus turned him down. No to the bread, Jesus says, no to the kingdoms, no to the angelic bodyguards. He is full up, he says, on worshiping God and serving only him.

Since you have already heard about a million sermons on what Jesus and the devil said to each other, I will skip that part today, especially since none of us is likely to get the Son of God test. We are going to get the regular old Adam and Eve test.

Instead, let us focus on WHERE the test took place...the wilderness...because I have an idea that every one of us has already been there. Maybe it looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the "Dear John or Dear Jane" letter you got when kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you could not find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing of your own breath, or the racing beat of your heart.

Wildernesses come so varied that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection. Just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand. I have been there at times.

Needless to say, most of us spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it, but I do not know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about. That could sound like bad news, but I do not think it is. I think it is good news because

even if no one ever wants to go there, the wilderness is one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. Take Jesus, for instance.

How did he end up there? The Spirit led him. What was he full of? He was full of 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? He was famished.

What that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness did to him was that it freed him from all the attempts to distract him from his true purpose. Freed him from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life. After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites, he had also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else.

The wisdom about the value of the wilderness is lost to popular American culture for sure and lost even to the Christian tradition that is charged with preserving it. Those of us who still belong to churches that still observe Lent may get a dose of it every year around this time, even if it is reduced to cutting down on how much you drink or putting a dollar in a box for every dessert you skip. The kernel of the wisdom is still there: that anyone who wants to follow Jesus all the way to the cross needs the kind of clarity and grit that is found only in the wilderness.

From Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, Christians are invited to do without some things they are perfectly capable of having....such as chocolate, or rich food, or loud parties with their friends...and to take on some things that they are just as capable of avoiding, such as a moral inventory or a lunch date with someone they are mad at.

It is called "Lent," from an English word meaning "Spring". It is not just a reference to the crocuses pushing their ways out of the ground in the season before Easter, but also to the greening of the human soul...pruned with repentance, fertilized with fasting, mulched with prayer.

Lent is not about punishing ourselves for being human. It is not about giving up Hershey's or taking on Pilates, so I do not blame anyone who has decided to give Lent a pass. But if you have spent a lot of time and/or money trying to acquire whatever it takes to grow your soul without seeing any new buds, then maybe a little spell in the wilderness is worth a try. A few weeks of choosing to live on less, not more. Of practicing subtraction instead addition. Not because your regular life is bad, but because you want to make sure it is your real life. The one you long to be living which can be hard to do when you are living in the fast lane of self-created busyness or worldly distraction. Living the fast lane.

Remember when sitting in the car at a red light gave you a moment just to sit and think? Not any more...not with our cell phone right there in our lap begging us to reach out and touch someone.

Give up using cell phones for Lent? Can you imagine? I have heard of other people who give up watching television or shopping, or take up eating while they are standing up. Of course, none of these things matter to people who have spent their whole lives trying to figure out where the next meal is

coming from, but in a culture of plenty I am impressed with anyone who decides to make it without anesthesia for a while. Giving up anesthesia means to give up whatever appliances or habits or substances we use to keep ourselves from feeling what it really feels like to live the kind of lives we are living.

Almost everyone uses something. If not anesthesia, then at least it is a favorite pacifier: murder mysteries, Facebook, reruns of the Sopranos, model train magazines. Those are not awful things, but they can be distractions...things to reach for when a person, for whatever reason, does not enter the wilderness of the present moment, to wonder what it is really all about. The problem for many of us is that we cannot go straight from setting down the cell phone to hearing the still, small voice of God in the wilderness. If it worked like that, churches would be full and Verizon would be out of business. If it worked like that, Lent would only be about twenty minutes long. Instead, we have forty whole days for finding out what life is like without the usual painkillers, which is how most of us learn what led us to use them in the first place. It is the opiate epidemic without the opiates.

The only antidote to the epidemic of temptation is obedience. The escape by Jesus from the tempter was not a matter of weighing pros and cons and making the best decision, but was a willful choice to submit to God. Again and again and again.

"Life is more than eating bread," Jesus whispers, though his rumbling stomach disagrees.

"Worship God and nothing else," he says, the world's kingdoms and all that power to do good right there for the taking.

"Do not test God," teaches the one who will be tested even unto death.

Half-dead from hunger and seemingly alone, this Jesus looks nothing like a king and this is certainly unlike the coronation ceremony at his baptism in the Jordan. But he is the real thing. The promises made to him at his baptism are refined in the desert, and he will be more ready for it later.

When Peter, the chief of the apostles and the rock of the church, tries to coax him into a kinder, gentler, way of saving the world that does not involve execution, Jesus recognizes the voice. When he hangs dying on the cross and the crowd tries to bait him, "If you are the Son of God, meet our expectations," he knows better. Then, as now, it is obedience to God the Father that will deliver him. The one who teaches with authority will live under the authority of the One who sent him.

Which brings me back to our time in the wilderness, this mysterious season of self-denial and other things that do not come naturally. Lent is not strength-training for the soul, not about exercising our spiritual muscles. It is about Obedience. Reliance. Dependence. It is about learning to be led...or, if necessary, to be driven....out to the desolate place within ourselves where our hungers and our dreams and our fears all take turns trying to shut out the voice of God.

In just a few weeks, we will follow Jesus to a garden where, for a moment, his own desires will conflict with the path he's been called to take. "If you can take this cup from me, please take it away," Jesus will pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. But his prayer is not finished. "Yet not what I want, but what you want."

Lent does not come naturally, not to any of us. But that is exactly why Lent is our only hope.

There are some places God intends to take us that we will never reach if left to our own devices. We would never go there following our own compass. But somewhere in the desert, alone but not alone, Jesus chooses to give himself to God. Chooses his ministry from God. Chooses to say, "Father, make me the person you would have me become."

May God grant us the grace to do the same...to choose who we will be and whose we will be.

May God guide you in the wilderness of this holy season, wherever the road takes you, in learning to trust the Spirit that led you into the wilderness to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God all the days of your life, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.