

“Remaining Faithful in the Wilderness”

Luke 4:1–13

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When I reflect on the traditional Lent 1 reading about Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness and then being tempted by the devil in various ways, several questions arise. Does Jesus know what will happen in the wilderness, both his hunger and the testing? Does he receive the questions in advance so that he can prepare? I had some professors who gave us test questions in advance, not that it always helped. And does Jesus know upfront how this story will end, with him coming out just fine on the other side, more assured of his calling?

If the answer to any of these questions, much less all of them, is “yes,” then Jesus is cheating. He has an unfair advantage on us when it comes to wilderness experiences in general and temptation in particular. When we began to deal with this pandemic almost exactly two years ago, we didn’t know any of these things, we didn’t even know how long it would last. When we have faced our own personal challenges, we haven’t known any of these things in advance. And as we enter this sacred season of wilderness-testing called Lent, we may have some general idea of what to expect, but we don’t really know where and how we will be tested, what challenges we might face, how we might be called to grow. If Jesus knows any of these things, he is cheating.

But I don’t think he does. Tradition tells us he is fully human, tempted like us in every way. Thus, he has to live one day at a time, just like us, and greet each challenge as it comes. Yet he does remain faithful. How does he do that, especially in today’s narrative? The answer to that question can tell us a great deal about how to remain faithful in the midst of our wilderness experiences.

One thing to note is the Spirit’s involvement in this story, the Spirit’s role throughout Jesus’ life and ministry. Luke says that after his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returns from the Jordan and is led by the Spirit

into the wilderness. The devil doesn't make him do it; God does! It may seem odd to us, but in Luke and its companion story, Acts, the Spirit plays a central role, guiding the activity of the faithful, and often this includes times of testing, one form of wilderness after another. It is not all wine and roses for Jesus or his disciples because the goal is not a life of ease but faithful participation in God's realm.

So, the Spirit guides Jesus into this time of fasting and testing, which tells us a couple things. First, he is not alone. If the Spirit leads him, the Spirit is with him, when he realizes it and when he does not. Second, there is a purpose to where he is going and what he will do, and that is what matters to Jesus throughout his ministry. If the Spirit guides him into the wilderness, divine intent is somehow involved. Both of these insights are incredibly helpful for us.

In our wilderness times, whether times of temptation or great hardship, the one thing that helps more than anything else is that we are not alone. God is with us always, whether we realize it or not. When dear friends lost their precious son — who was a senior in college — this week to liver cancer, I didn't have much to offer other than prayer and my own tears. I told them I knew they didn't need anyone's theological rambling but the only help I have found in such times is the awareness that God is with me, weeping too. I have wanted more, but this is all I have received, and in the end, it has been enough. As the Apostle Paul says to the church at Rome, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. I pray that this will be enough for my friends.

It helps to know we are not alone and it helps to know there is a purpose to our lives, even our times in the wilderness. This does not mean that God directly causes everything, including hardship. The Holocaust does away with this claim. It simply means that God uses all that happens to us to shape us and mold us toward something good. It is God's good, not ours, which means it isn't always pleasant or easy. But as it is for Jesus, the place where God calls us is always the best place to be, if not always the safest.

Another thing to note is Jesus' knowledge and use of scripture. To every tempting offer the devil makes, Jesus responds with scripture. "It is written," Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3)."

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him (Deuteronomy 6:13).’” And, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test (Deuteronomy 6:16).’” Jesus obviously knows scripture, but knowledge alone is not enough. Even the devil knows scripture and quotes it. It’s understanding the texts and what they are saying that matters, knowing which texts speak most critically to which situation, realizing how God’s intent is best served in all things.

Jesus knows and understands scripture. It seems to flow through him naturally like it does in a drifter in the post-apocalyptic film “The Book of Eli” who has memorized the entire Bible. Jesus is the Word-Made-Flesh. In this instance, “the Word” is not the Bible. It is the essence of Divine being and purpose. Jesus embodies this Word completely, and scripture is the record of how God has sought to communicate it, so it makes sense that Jesus knows and understands the words of scripture. They are a great resource for him in a time of testing.

They are a great resource for us, too, if we understand them and allow them to live through us. Years ago, Baptist churches practiced sword drills. Young people memorized verses of scripture and then were tested on their memories. We abandoned the drills in churches like ours in favor of teaching the big picture of the Bible because it is the big picture that matters most, and sometimes young people learned the details but not what they meant. But now we learn the big picture without what informs it, and that is not helpful either. I can’t tell you how many times an adult has said to me something like this, “I know I don’t believe such and such, but can you tell me why I don’t?” An uninformed faith is not a personal faith, and it may not hold up when challenged. We need to return to teaching the details, which this church does better than most, while making sure we retain the big picture.

In our wilderness experiences of testing and temptation, it helps to know that we are not alone and that there is a purpose to life, even the challenging parts of it, and it helps to have the words of holy scripture to guide us. One other thing we can learn from Jesus’ experience in the wilderness is that it helps to know who we are. Each temptation Jesus faces relates to some aspect of his identity, what kind of Messiah he will be. Will he use his influence for his own needs or for the needs of others? Will he be devoted to God, no

matter what, or be willing to compromise in a misguided effort to accomplish more? Will he be willing to put on a show to attract a crowd, ask God to prove God's worth in front of people, or let faith and God speak for themselves?

We know the answer to these questions. Jesus proves faithful in every way because he is not alone and because the words of scripture guide his every action, but Jesus does not discover who he is in this moment. He already knows who he is, and while his character is further defined and strengthened here, this prior knowledge helps immensely. There is an old saying attributed to Alexander Hamilton — those who stand for nothing fall for anything. Jesus knows who he is and what he stands for, so he isn't going to fall for anything. The wilderness may be harsh, and his temptations may be enticing, but he will remain faithful.

The message for us seems obvious. The clearer we are about our identity and calling, the better equipped we will be for our wilderness experiences. It's difficult enough to go through the darkness of grief or divorce, forced termination or a major crisis of faith, if we know who we are. But if we don't know, the winds of challenge and temptation can knock us off our feet. There is no magic formula to achieve self-understanding, but it something worth pursuing every way we can.

On a corporate level, consider what is happening in Ukraine. It is tragic and could change at any moment, but most have marveled at the incredible spirit of the Ukrainian people. How have they held up for even this long, given their military disadvantage? They know who they are as a people and value their identity. That makes a difference.

Jesus is not done with temptation at the end of this story. Luke says, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*" Temptation is ongoing, we go through many wildernesses. Who anticipated the past two years other than a few crazy public health experts? But if we realize we are not alone and ground ourselves in God's intent, if we know who we are and trust that there is purpose in our lives, we can remain faithful to God and to ourselves.