

Led Into the Wilderness

Luke 4:1-13

"In April 1992, a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. His name was Christopher Johnson McCandless. He had given \$25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet, and invented a new life for himself." Those sentences begin a riveting book, later turned into a movie, titled "Into the Wild."

The wilderness is a place to be tested. Without the comforts of home. With fewer tools at your disposal and so there is a stronger premium on your intellect and your spirit. To find the limits, and test them. This young man Christopher McCandless went into the wilderness. His is a complicated story, his preparations, or lack thereof, not to be emulated. The end of his story serves as a cautionary tale. But there is that call of the wild that sounds louder to some than others. Some feel called to set out into the wilderness, to test themselves and to be tested.

The desert, the silent, wordless place of wilderness. It's where everything else is stripped away. It's where there seems to be no life. But it's also where God does his best work. God brings life where there was no life. God brings life in the desert. God makes a way in the wilderness. God sends the Word to the wordless places.

We may not want to go to the wilderness, but the wilderness is where God speaks to his people. The wilderness is where God brings his people when they need to hear a word of repentance, when they need to turn their focus back to God and away from the trappings of

power and prestige. The wilderness is where the Israelites left behind the comfortable slavery they had in Egypt as God prepared a way for them to the Promised Land. The wilderness is what they were led through as they traveled to exile in Babylon, and God prepared a way for them to return. The wilderness is where God spoke to prophets on the run, preparing them to go back to where they'd come with a new message. The wilderness is where John prepares the way for Jesus. And the wilderness is where Jesus is led to be tested and tempted.

The first Sunday of Lent always includes the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the devil. Immediately before, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove, and the voice from heaven had said "You are my beloved Son; with You I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Jesus' identity had been confirmed. Jesus was clearly described as God's Son. Luke follows Jesus' baptism with the genealogy that connects Jesus back to David, Abraham, Noah, and Adam. Jesus knows who He is, and so do we. He doesn't need to go to the wilderness to find himself.

Yet it is right after that, right after his identity has been confirmed, right after it is clear who he is, that Jesus is sent into the wilderness. Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days, where he doesn't eat and faces temptations. Then, when He's at His weakest, the devil comes looking for Him. The devil comes to tempt Jesus, to test Jesus, to make him doubt who He is, what His mission is, and how God the Father cares for Him.

Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted and tested over a period of forty days. The connection to Israel's wandering in the desert is obvious. Israel went into the wilderness to have the trappings of Egypt stripped away, yet they were led in the wilderness forty years because of their lack of faith and trust in the God who had saved them from slavery. As the greater and more faithful Son of God, Jesus did what the Israelites could not do.

Neither can we. Life in a world beset by sin (within and without) is filled with temptation. Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer as he gives it in Luke 11:4, concludes with the petition: "Lead us not into temptation." Why not? Because we cannot handle it. Jesus, the faithful Son who has conquered sin and the Devil for us, is our only hope in time of temptation. We deal with temptations by turning to Jesus for strength and protection.

Going into the wilderness leads to unexpected challenges. Lewis and Clark and their team were prepared to paddle up the Missouri River, looking for a way to get to the Pacific Ocean. They weren't prepared for mountains. They weren't prepared for the Rocky Mountains. They weren't prepared for the mountains to keep going and going. They had to strip their mission down to its most basic element, learn from the locals like Sacajawea who knew the wilderness they were in, and figure out how to keep going.

Maybe it is the wilderness of grief, the wilderness of cancer treatments or job changes or uprootedness or broken relationships, or perhaps it is the wilderness of war or conflict or poverty or addiction. We find, though, in those wilderness places, that we are not alone. God is with us in the wilderness. It does not mean that

the wilderness is easier to walk through or the wind less cold or the heat less oppressive, but it does mean that in wilderness, we are not alone or forsaken, even though we may feel that way.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, imagines a mentor demon, Screwtape, writing to a mentee demon on how best to lead a human away from God. In one chapter, the mentee demon is excited that his human patient is going through a trough, a period of dryness and doubt. Screwtape warns his mentee not to be so quick to judge. Humans follow a law of undulation, a series of peaks and troughs in all areas of their lives, but especially in their religious life. Humans know they were created for something more, and are continually striving for that, but also fall back. Both God and the devil can use these changes. Their goals, though, are totally different. Screwtape writes that "We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over."

It is in the troughs, it is in the valleys, that people learn to trust God not because of his presence, but in spite of its lack. Screwtape ends his letter with the advice that "Our cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

That's what Jesus did. He went into the wilderness and still obeyed His Father. He was forsaken for us on the cross, and still obeyed His Father. Because He faced temptation in the wilderness, we are not alone when we face

temptation. Because He was forsaken, we are forgiven even when we give in to temptation.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in his book *Walden*, "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life and not when I had come to die discover that I had not lived." Some college students strike out for the wilderness or take up meditation in order to "discover themselves." Jesus went into the wilderness to do what we cannot and could not do. Because of how He resisted temptation when He was led into the wilderness, we have deep, abundant life. That's a wonderful promise.

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