

HOMILY
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Even though spring is less than a month away, this is not exactly camping season. Nonetheless, over the next six weeks of Lent we are going into the wilderness as we prepare for Easter Sunday. And while we make our journey through the wilderness, we're going to tell stories, wilderness stories from the Bible. Today's journey is with Our Master as he is tempted by the devil. Next week, we will go into the wilderness with Abraham, then Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, and finally with Our Lord as he makes his way up to Golgotha. Anyway, time in the wilderness seems to be a prerequisite for the promised land of authentic faith. 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 his Father 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 into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over he was hungry." 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 eleven-day journey, but it took them 40 years to get there. What took so long? The women in the congregation already have an answer for that—Moses was a man and he refused to ask for directions.

Seriously, though, 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 subdued, 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?"

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 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. On a trip to Jericho in the Holy Land, I once visited 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. One of the local men giving the tour took us to his own orchard where irrigation was used sparingly. He said, “These trees could go without rain for another two weeks. You see, when they were young, I frequently kept the water from them. This hardship caused them to send their roots deep 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. And 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 pre-requisite for a deep faith. If life comes too easily, if there are no challenges to overcome, no mountains to climb, 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 to be no other way to do it. No pain, no gain. Notice that it is the Spirit that drives Jesus into the wilderness. The Tempter did not lure him into the wilderness. The Spirit drove him there. Evidently the wilderness was exactly where he was supposed to be. Now people of faith always struggle with the questions, “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 subscribe to that theological viewpoint. I believe it is entirely consistent with the teaching of Jesus.

God does not pick out individual people and say to them, “I’m going to cause you unimaginable suffering in order 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 a place in God's overall plan. Some hardship, some adversity seems to be necessary for spiritual growth.

And so, 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 bow to Satan and settle for a life of material comfort while remaining spiritually poor. Others have moved through the wilderness and found a closeness to God and to others that they have never known before—a faith and purpose that they would never have discovered before. Each of us has a choice in how we will respond to life. I do know that some people find a faith, a peace and a joy in the wilderness that they could not have found anywhere else.

The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where he was tested by the devil. 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 our 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 this day? By the grace of God, you can make it through!