

9 March 2014
Matthew 4:1-11

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A man was driving to work when a truck ran a stop sign, hit his car broadside, and knocked him cold. Passersby pulled him from the wreck and revived him. He began a terrific struggle and had to be tranquilized by the medics.

Later, when he was calm, they asked him why he struggled so. He said, "I remember the impact, then nothing. I woke up on a concrete slab in front of a huge, flashing 'Shell' sign...and somebody was standing in front of the "S"!"

Wilderness

Momentous events are sometimes followed by times of disorientation. If you have ever come home from a retreat or an especially gratifying vacation, you know the feeling of what is called "re-entry." I see it all the time with our young people who go on Emmaus weekends or spend a week at Silver Lake where the intentional community is infused with the breath of the Holy Spirit. Then it ends. We try to carry our "mountaintop" experiences back into the every day. Soon the glow is gone and the world enters in. That usually results in our feeling disoriented or lost or even sad.

Jesus' momentous event was his baptism at the Jordan. Not only did he get wet, he was anointed by the voice of God. Something like that needs a little time to sink in. The gospel tells us that then Jesus was "led out into the wilderness."

And this is where Lent begins – in the wilderness. What exactly does the wilderness mean to us?

The year after I graduated from college some of my hiking buddies and I decided to celebrate this momentous occasion. What better way to do this than to spend time the way we knew best. Out in mother nature. This time our goal was to hike Katahdin – the northern mountain terminus of the Appalachian Trail. One sign we were heading into the wilderness was the fact we had to register with the Maine Park Service weeks ahead of time. Another was that once we got north of Millinocket the roads turned to dirt. We saw moose, spruce grouse, grey jays and boreal chickadees. Yup. We were definitely in the northern wilderness. But it was nothing like the wilderness experience Jesus encountered.

We had backpacks and sleeping bags and water and food enough for the measly three days of roughing it. Our wilderness was remote for certain but it was lush and filled with life. If we had to find food we could. Water was plentiful. If anyone was injured or lost we could rely on the rangers for rescue.

The wilderness Jesus faced was a desert compared to Baxter State Park. Jesus trod the hard soil, kicking up dust as he hoisted his small bag with what little food and water it could hold. He walked over stones and dust and brushed passed tough drought-resistant shrubs. Despite the desert appearing lifeless – overhead wheeled a bird of prey, its keen eye watching for whatever small creature Jesus heard rustling in the brush. When night came the heat of the day would yield to cold. He could huddle under his cloak in the hollow of some rocks. Through it all his mind and his heart were turning over those words that dropped from the sky as the long-evaporated water dripped from his face in the Jordan. "This is my son – who I delight in. Listen to him."

We don't know what went through his mind but we can imagine. Imagine the questions, the doubts, the excitement churning with anxiety. And just when Jesus' doubt and stress were at their highest, Satan came to visit.

Satan – the hinderer – is anyone or anything that steers us away from living as children of God. The hinderer is always there tapping on our shoulders but is only most successful when we are at our weakest. Satan always goes for what makes us tick or what matters to us on our deepest level. For Jesus this is scripture. Quoting scripture out of context, Satan shows Jesus that he could have all the power he wanted and still justify it by the word of God.

Forty hours, never mind forty days in the wilderness are enough to make anyone delirious. The offer of bread alone could make a grown man cry. But Satan makes a mistake - using the word of God *on* the Word of God. Not only does Jesus know the scriptures intimately, Jesus also draws on the Spirit of God that dwells within him.

Jesus response to Satan shows us that in the wilderness sustenance can be found. No matter what wilderness we face individually, Jesus shows us the way to respond when the hinderer comes knocking at our weakest moments. Jesus inspires us to live on every word that comes from the mouth of God – not only study but live the scriptures. He helps us to know to test God is to test our own faith. It's okay to doubt in the midst of suffering – just remember also that God cares for us with companionship, hope, faith and sustaining grace. And last but not least, we are warned to be careful of what powers we bow to. Giving our lives over to the power of God means our lives will be infused by the Spirit of God. “Let the word of God dwell in you richly” and you will have enough. You will be enough.

We begin Lent in the wilderness, but maybe whatever your wilderness is won't look so scary with Jesus at your side. Allow Lent to be the time to take back the pieces of our lives that have been given over to powers other than God. Reclaim your life. Reclaim your place in God's sustaining creation. Live humanly in the face of all that reeks of destruction and despair. Then lent will be a time of putting the world back together, one piece, one situation, one person at a time. God not only dwells in Jesus, God dwells in you. Let's guide each other through the wilderness and be sustenance for one another.

With inspiration from *Lent: reflections and stories from the daily readings*. Megan McKenna. pp 21-23