

## TRAINING IN THE WILDERNESS

Lent 1 Year A

Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Rom 12:5-19; Mt. 4:1-11

Gladstone 01/03/2020

---

We all know what it is like to go through wilderness experiences—some, perhaps, more than others—those times when you seem all alone—when you feel alienated from those you love—when even God seems far away—when you're depressed or going through a crisis—when it is hard to pray—and even when you do, you can hear your prayers echoing back to you off the ceiling. This is no ordinary wilderness—this is a wilderness that has a certain amount of desperation attached to it—where you feel weak, vulnerable and helpless.

We all go through these times, sooner or later. It's no fun, but it can be a great time of learning—learning to let go of yourself and allow God to take control of both you and your situation.

Matthew begins the story of Jesus' ministry with Jesus in the wilderness. Note how he puts it: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness..." The word "led" in the Greek has the sense of being driven or compelled. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus headed straight for the wilderness. God's Spirit *drove* Him there!

Now, as I have said, most of us have been through wilderness experiences of one kind or another—we have known spiritual dryness, abandonment and despair—but would we have ever assumed that it was God's Spirit that led us to that place? Yet the Bible is full of stories about people whom God led to a place like that—where he allowed them to become weak, and alone, and desperate—where He allowed them to be tempted by Satan.

Job knew it—God allowed his body to be touched, his family and business to be destroyed, and his friends turn against him. He knew the despair and aloneness of the wilderness. So did the children of Israel—they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. David knew the wilderness experience when he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and are so far from my cry, and from the words of my distress? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; by night as well, but I find no rest!" (Psalm 22:1,2)

Sometimes, in our experience of the wilderness, God does that—He removes all of our comfort—even, sometimes, that which seems to be necessary for physical life. Jesus was there for forty days—he was on the very edge of life. Many of the great saints of the church have had similar experiences. St. John of the Cross calls this kind of experience "the dark

night of the soul.” Yet he also says that this is the greatest privilege a Christian can experience—to be brought to a point where we have no more resources, when we are left on the edge of the precipice, with nothing to hang on to, and where even God seems absent. Then we are forced to rely on faith alone—not some kind of mystical experience, not on our own limited resources—not even on our spiritual resources. We must rest on God’s Word and His promises, alone.

That is the point where Jesus begins his ministry. He is hungry—he is, in fact, starving. And it is at this point—always at this point—at the point of our greatest weakness—where Satan comes to him. That is where he comes to us as well—not where we are strong, but where we are weak—when we feel alone and vulnerable and helpless. And this is precisely the point when faith takes over and Jesus, who has already overcome that wilderness comes to us and takes us by the hand and gently leads us into the green pastures of his presence.

A man by the name of Kenneth Filkins has caught this beautifully in a poem entitled “The Pit.” Visualize, if you will a great pit—maybe this is a pit you have dug yourself through your own sin—or perhaps it’s one dug for you by others and you’re the victim—visualize this pit into which you have fallen and cannot get out of. Filkins writes:

A man fell into a pit and he couldn’t get out.

BUDDHA said: “Your pit is only a state of mind.”

A HINDU said: “This pit is for purging you and making you more perfect.”

CONFUCIUS said: “If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen into that pit.”

A NEW-AGER said: “Maybe you should network with some other pit dwellers.”

A SELF-PITYING PERSON said: “You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen my pit.”

A NEWS REPORTER said: “Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?”

A FEDERAL BUREAUCRAT said: “Have you paid your taxes on that pit?”

A COUNTY INSPECTOR said: “Do you have a permit for that pit?”

A REALIST said: “That’s a pit.”

An IDEALIST said: “The world shouldn’t have pits.”

An OPTIMIST said: “Things could be worse.”

A PESSIMIST said: “Things will get worse.”

But Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

A pit is an awful place to be—particularly the pit that’s been created by the power of sin and temptation. But there is One who will help. There is one who has managed to avoid the pit and who seeks to help us out of our own pit. His name is Jesus—and he lives and reigns with God—and with God he is able—able to help—able to save—able to redeem—for he has overcome it.

That is one kind of wilderness experience—one in which we find ourselves helpless—dependant only on God through Christ for our deliverance. But there is also another kind of wilderness experience—one that is both positive and spiritually uplifting.

In the midst of what is often a noisy and chaotic world, it’s good, sometimes, to get away from it all—to actually *seek out* the wilderness—to seek out a solitary place where you have the space and the time to think or to pray—to reflect where you are in your spiritual walk—to recharge those spiritual battery cells—a wilderness of your *own* design where you can meditate on the Word of God and communicate, uninterrupted, with your God.

We all need these times every now and again—when you think that you have had just about enough—those times when you want to stand up and shout, “Stop the world, I want to get off!” Time spent in the wilderness under *these* circumstances can be a very rewarding experience. It can rejuvenate the soul and restore your spiritual preparedness for entering back into that noisy and chaotic world, from which you have just escaped. And it is God, also, who leads us there.

This Sunday—today—is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is a period of forty days, not counting Sundays, before Easter. Lent has been a part of the church for many centuries. It began last Wednesday—Ash Wednesday—and lasts through to Maundy Thursday (9 April). It’s modeled after the forty days of self-denial and prayer that Jesus spent in the wilderness immediately prior to commencing his ministry.

Lent calls us to join Jesus in the wilderness—to prepare ourselves over these next forty days for Easter. Lent challenges us, to find for ourselves a wilderness. In the midst of our often noisy and chaotic world, Lent comes as an opportunity to seek out solitary places where we can listen for God’s voice and gain new direction for our lives.

Someone once wrote, “I need the wilderness, don’t you? I need the desert experience. I need a special time of the year when I redouble my efforts to pray and rethink my faith, when I seek

the Holy with extra zeal and devotion. I need God in order to return to sanity and clarity and wholeness” (John Killinger in PULPIT DIGEST, March/April 1995, p.39).

Lent is just such a time. It calls us to find our own wilderness, to seek out quiet places and times to be with God. This is the supreme blessing, you see. It’s what we need more than anything else—that renewed sense of God’s presence—that God is with us—loving, protecting, providing for us and calling us to service. And like Jesus, if we want to be involved in ministry—if we want to make a difference in our own community—we have to start in the wilderness. The wilderness is our training ground—our Boot Camp—for the spiritual life we seek.

One commentator suggests that Jesus did not go into the wilderness primarily to be tempted and tested by Satan but to seek solitude—to be “alone with the Father, to concentrate for forty days and nights on the Divine Presence, to focus his life completely on spiritual things” (p.37). Note that it was only at the very end of the 40 days that Satan came to tempt Jesus. For the rest of the time Jesus was in close communion with the Father.

This Lent, find yourself a wilderness. Find a place, a time each day just for you and God. Fence off some corner or closet of your life—some path you can walk—just to be with God.

But I must warn you—the wilderness can be a dangerous place. As well as a place of retreat, it can be a place of temptation—temptation to take the easy road—temptation to deny the power and the Word of God—temptation to put yourself first—to look out for number one. This kind of wilderness is not always an easy place to get to...or to stay in. Like Jesus, you just might find yourself being tested and tempted.

But when you *do* get to that place—when you find that place of solitude away from the noise and chaos of the world—when you pull yourself apart from the distractions of your circumstances—you will find a growing sense of God’s presence. Profound insights into God’s will and God’s word will come just when you need them. You will find a renewed sense of purpose and direction—a feeling of peace and wholeness.

This Lent, find yourself a wilderness, and experience the divine presence of God in your life.

To God be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.