

1 Lent: February 21, 2010

***Entering the Wilderness* by Robert Bowler**

Last Wednesday, we began our 40 days journey following Jesus into the wilderness. I find it ironic that the most mystical of the gospels, that of John, leaves out the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness all together. Mark writes two sentences in his narrative: the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, he was there for forty days, Satan tempted him, wild beasts kept him company, and angels waited on him. That is all Mark knew or at least that is all Mark felt he needed to tell the rest of us about Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness.

It is only Matthew and Luke who go into detail about Jesus being tested by the devil. One thing we know from the account is that the devil knows his Bible, but Jesus knows it better. Jesus passes his wilderness exam because his biblical scholarship is not simply an intellectual exercise. He lives it.

Each time Satan offers him more—and isn't the devil always saying more is better?—more bread, more power, more protection, [more wine, more TV, faster internet] Jesus says no. No to the bread, no to the kingdoms, no to the angelic bodyguards. He serves only God, and in this service he is filled. So, in the end, the devil departs with his bag still full of bribes, and Jesus is free to go. He passed the Son of God wilderness test with flying colors.

Since, when it's our turn, it is unlikely we will ever experience the Son of God wilderness test, I want to talk about where this happened—the wilderness. I suspect that we have all been there and had our own tests to undergo. Maybe it was a hospital bed, or a waiting room; maybe it was a cheap motel room after being kicked out of your house; maybe it was the parking lot after you lost your job; or, maybe it is your own heart, where a deep loneliness and even emptiness reaches out to God to be filled.

Desert wildernesses and intellectual devils come in all shapes and sizes. The only way you know when you are in your wilderness is when you look around for what you normally count on—the comfort of home, food on the table, friends and loved ones all around, wealth and power, comfort, busyness and endless stimulation—and you come up empty. Our trip to the desert tests us more than we can possibly imagine but in it we can find ourselves, we can discover what life is really all about. In it we find our freedom.

Most of us spend our time and money avoiding the desert, but none of us succeeds forever. Eventually we must all take our wilderness exam. And we should be happy when that time comes—though it will no doubt be painful, excruciating even. It takes faith to see our wilderness as good news, but it truly is the most spirit-filled, life-changing place we can find ourselves.

Take Jesus for example: The spirit that descended upon him like a dove at his baptism, led him to the wilderness. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. What else did he live on? Nothing. How long was he in the wilderness? 40 days and nights,

weeks and weeks. How did he feel in the end? He must have been famished. But he was free, nothing more could tempt him from his way forward in life. He could now serve God with his whole heart.

We don't value the wilderness in our culture and neither does the Christian Church which is charged with preserving it. After all, Jesus prayed in the Garden, alone, and ultimately faced his excruciating death on the cross, alone. These central events of the Christian tradition are what gives the church its meaning and purpose; they are wilderness events.

Lent for you may be about reducing your alcohol consumption or putting an extra dollar in the collection plate for every dessert you skip. These are good things, but they merely scratch the surface of a holy Lent; the real wisdom of Lent is the opportunity the season offers to follow Jesus right up to the cross. It tests us enough to find within the new clarity and grit needed to follow the Christ in living the deepest compassion.

The word Lent is from an English word meaning spring—not just the season that often begins with the blooming of snowdrops and crocuses, but mainly the greening of the human soul. If Christ is the Life, then Lent is a time when we dig deeper within for the wellsprings of life itself. We may prune with repentance, fertilize with fasting, cultivate with self-reflection, and mulch with prayer, but the goal is not to punish ourselves, but to flourish with new life. You may decide to take up pilates or invite someone with whom you estranged out to lunch, but remember to see it as a way forward for your soul growth for 365 days a year, not just 40.

Lent is about living your life, to the fullest, not about denying it. Ask yourself, “What are the obstacles keeping you from knowing the life-giving impulse of the Christ within you... the love, the joy, the communion?” Often, it is not what we accumulate that will make us truly happy. Often plants bloom because they have been stressed. Likewise, new buds of soul growth come with time in the wilderness—a few weeks of living on less not more, a month of more simplicity and quiet. Instead of turning on the TV, stop and read the bible or other spiritual book, or just sit and think.

For the first three centuries of Christendom, Christians hid themselves and their communities from persecution, or they became martyrs. But after three hundred years, they found themselves accepted, established in freedom in the Roman Empire. Constantine, the Roman Emperor, called a council in Nicea, to establish the faith on a common creedal basis.

However, Christianity is not simply a creed, but a way, The Way, as the early Christians called their faith. With state sanction came orthodoxy, and a new stress on outer rituals to the exclusion of inner soul growth. Many who were called to follow Jesus in The Way, beginning with Anthony, sought out a life in the wilderness. He headed out with nothing but the clothes on his back and a faith that Christ will sustain him. In doing so he followed Jesus' instruction to the rich

young man, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; and come, follow Me.” He followed Jesus who taught about the birds and the lilies:

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?’²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?—²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?”³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God* and his* righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

St. Anthony was not the first to follow Jesus into isolation, trusting in God to feed and clothe him, but he was the first to do so literally, leaving the city completely behind and living in the desert for over 70 years. Few of us can imagine going into St. Anthony’s wilderness, passing his tests, but we can spend some time contemplating our lives and removing a few of the obstacles to finding the Christ within. We can make for ourselves a holy Lent, a new greening of our spirit, cultivating the growth of the Living Christ in our hearts. We can finally slow down enough to begin what Plotinus called, “the flight of the alone to the Alone.” Amen.