

*“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”*

The wilderness or desert in the ancient world was a scary place. It could be blazing hot during the day and freezing cold at night. Food and water were hard to find. Wild beasts roamed the desert. It was a lonely place. So why would the Spirit drive Jesus into the desert?

The desert represented a place of transformation for the Israelites and for the early Christians.

Abraham wandered in the desert, going from place to place, directed by God and in the process he was transformed from a man not just chosen by God but into a man with a covenant with God, a man who would become the father of a people more numerous than the stars with heirs more numerous than the grains of sand.

The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. They encountered many trials and tribulations, succumbing to idol worship, fear, internal strife, and distrust in the God who had liberated them from Egypt, who fed them and provided water for them, but that time in the desert transformed a ragged band of slaves into a people with an identity and a purpose, a people with a covenant with their God.

The Spirit drives Jesus into the desert on purpose. He goes into the desert for 40 days like the Israelites were in the desert for 40 years. The length of our Lenten observance is also 40 days meant to reflect Jesus' 40 days in the desert. Lent too is a time in the desert. Something then is supposed to happen in the desert!

Granted we usually associate being in the desert with the difficult times in our lives, times when we've felt lost, defeated, betrayed, and hurt. Sometimes it was our own decisions that landed us there sometimes it came out of the blue. Sometimes we think God has abandoned us or is punishing us. It might be health issues or an accident, job issues, or relationship or any of a myriad of things that make our lives stressful if not painful. Why would we want to go into the desert voluntarily?

Once Christianity was legalized and adopted by the Emperor Constantine many people became Christian and we know what happens when something becomes a fad...Those who took their faith seriously wanted to get away from the crowds whose conversions were less than profound. These believers sought refuge in the desert and a tradition sprang up of holy men and holy women who would live solitary but holy lives seeking God. One of the oddest was St. Simeon the Stylite who lived on a pillar for 37 years. One who had the most impact was Anthony whose story of wrestling with demons in the desert is as powerful now as it was then. So the desert took hold of Christian imagination, even when it didn't seem to make any sense. My favorite stories are of the Irish monks who set sail from the west coast of Ireland in search of the desert, many of them setting off in small boats known as coracles probably drifting to their doom in the cold waters of the North Atlantic, although I wouldn't be surprised if some of them had made it to the shores of the continent of North America. In any event, the practice of seeking solitude to better commune with God is a long established Christian tradition.

What's interesting is what happens in the desert. The old life is burned away and a new life is born it's one of those chrysalis into a butterfly moments, even if the butterfly probably looked more like John the Baptist in his camel's hair coat than Joseph in his "coat of many colors".

This was certainly true for Jesus. When the Holy Spirit drives him into the desert he has just heard God pronounce him his Son, the Beloved. On any kind of psychological level this would have been an overwhelming experience so having some down time to reflect on what had happened during his baptism was probably helpful. Furthermore Jesus undergoes temptation in the desert, specifically Satan tempts him. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not provide any detail about the nature of these temptations but this struggle equips Jesus and prepares him for the struggle to come with the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Romans, not to mention his own family who think he has lost his mind.

By opening himself to God Jesus is equipped for combat against the powers of darkness: bureaucracy, indifference, ignorance, and selfish indulgence. Above all Jesus has learned to control his will and submit to God. There is no promise of comfort or ease, just the right tool for the job. That tool is obedience that is based on a rock-solid trust in God and a willingness to let go of old values, identities, and even people, but most especially of the appetite and desire for power and the pursuit of pleasure. Obedience will enable Jesus to receive the power of God to drive out demons, to heal the sick, to comfort the downtrodden, and to challenge the status quo.

Yes, it was in the desert that Jesus has learned who he is and who he is to be. The Spirit has broken open his psyche and sent him into a place alone to rebuild it; alone with God that is, except for the wild beasts and the angels.

Jesus called us to repentance, which really means to turn around and reorient ourselves so that we are headed in the right direction. That right direction is a return to the condition of obedience that God intended for all of his creatures including human beings. We get a hint of this when Mark refers to the wild beasts with who were there with Jesus in the desert. The mention of wild beasts that are not a threat points back to the Garden of Paradise when those first humans lived in harmony with all living creatures. Some commentators have suggested that during his time in the desert Jesus is restoring the relationships in creation to what was intended, further supported by the fact that his needs were taken care of by the angels. Sounds pretty good doesn't it, all the furry creatures you could desire and winged room service? In this very compressed sentence Mark is casting Jesus as the new Adam and therefore us, we who are now inheritors of this restored kingdom, it makes us a new creation.

Have you accepted yourself as a new creation? Old habits, old ways of being are hard to break. Temptation is different for all of us but it's usually about bending the laws of physics or moral law and ignoring the consequences. A large piece of chocolate cake has the same number of empty calories whether you eat it sitting down or standing up. That extra glass of wine has puts us over the limit no matter how much water we drank or how many tortilla chips you ate to absorb it. Then there is the illusion of control and how we react when our sense of control or autonomy is challenged or threatened. We all have things that tempt us and Lent is a

great time to wrestle with them to focus on God and to transcend - at least for the moment some of those earthly desires that drag us down.

Sitting alone with God can be scary. Disengaging our minds from the concerns of the day can be difficult. Reflecting on our actions of the day can be painful. Short prayers - "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me" can help, sometimes repeating this prayer over and over can be calming. Other times, the whole Lord's prayer is necessary even repeated over and over to short-circuit a really destructive thought. Remembering to breathe helps. In time, with practice we may be given the gift of peace and acceptance.

However you choose to experience the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving Lent is an invitation to spend some time in your desert, not because it's a place of deprivation but because it is an opportunity for transformation.

Amen.