

The Signposts Are There



The resistance to the temptations in the wilderness serves as a model for the Christian church and its membership: by resisting evil in the world we define who we are. In Peter Ustinov's drama, *Beethoven's Tenth*, a resurrected Beethoven evaluates a young composer. Beethoven tells the young musician there is nothing wrong with his technique. The problem is that "you have nothing to say, and you say it quite well" In music composition, as in every important matter, the effective composer has a keen sense of what he or she wants to say.

Good morning, my name is John, some know me as John the Baptizer. I've spent my life living simply, and doing my best to help others see the error of their way and hopefully turn themselves around – I'm God's messenger they say, a signpost along your way... sent to prepare the way of the Lord. To one and all I offered the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Folks came from all over to confess and be reborn. So one day, there I stood in the river Jordan praying over those who had lost their way and wanted to start again...dunk, dunk, dunk ...go and sin no more I'd say. Turning to greet the next person in line I was speechless to see my cousin, Jesus from Nazareth standing before me asking to be baptized. "Me, baptize you???" He was persistent and so I did as he asked... dunk, dunk, I dipped and lifted him from the water but the third time as he tried to stand ... right in front of us the heavens seemed to open and ... the Spirit came and touched on him ... but the voice ... "my son", "the Beloved", "with you I'm well pleased." At first I thought the voice was speaking to me but when it touched Jesus - I knew. I almost dropped him back into the water – I am not worthy to touch him ... my cousin ... the Beloved! And then he was gone. Said he had to be on his way, he needed time alone out there he said, but he would be back. I knew that day that I had fulfilled my mission *the signpost was there.*

I worried about him. The wilderness is a wild place, the waiting place. It also connects to very basic spirituality: a place to grapple with God, a place to learn

dependence on nature and its provisions, a place of extremes or contrasts, of wild beasts and desert. It is the Lenten space par excellence. The wilderness is the place where people trim life down to its bare essentials, and figure out who they truly are.

We can lose the sacramental affront of the wilderness, its sense of danger, its powerful critique of our use of language and its irrepressible challenge to human frailties. My fear is that much of what we call "spirituality" is becoming overly sanitized and sterile, far removed from the anguish of pain and of its anchored ness in the wilderness place.

Without the tough-minded discipline of the wilderness experience, spirituality will lose its bite, and its capacity to speak prophetically to its culture with a demand for justice and peace. ("You have nothing to say, and you say it quite well.") Avoiding pain and confrontation, it makes no demands and assumes no risks but offers the 'soft' life. The modern versions of spirituality seem most concerned with self-fulfillment, dissolving at last into a spirituality that protects its practitioners from the vulnerability it was meant to provoke. The wilderness will have none of it! In the fierce geography of the wilderness we soon learn who we are and what is most important to us.

I believe that this is God's purpose in times of testing, to help us grow and to show us that we have the faith and ability to stand up to the testing so that we will trust God in difficult times -- to strengthen our faith and Christian character. At the same time, Satan has his own purpose -- to turn those being tested away from God -- to "tempt" them to sin.

The wilderness is a place that calls us into repentance, seeking forgiveness, and a promise to take a different and more life-giving road. During Lent we are called to choose life, and forsake the ways of death and destruction. This is a season in the history of the world when we could well be called to examine the ways we contribute to the degradation of the earth. We are called to repent and to forsake our sins against God's good earth. Repent?

There is a story told of a student minister arriving one summer in a small village. The manse was in need of some fixing up. He decided to paint the peeling and faded wooden exterior. He was advised to buy four gallons for paint. He bought white, the same as it had once been, and started in. The dry wood drank up the paint, so that he was soon down to two gallons, and it was clear that he would never get the job done

without more paint. Having little money in his pocket, he decided to just add water to the two remaining gallons and make more paint. Just as he was nearing the completion of his paint job on the manse, thunderclouds rolled in and it began to pour. As he ran for cover, he noticed that the paint he had worked so hard to put on ... was coming off. Looking up he cried out, "Why? Look what you've done! All my hard work, and it's ruined! What am I going to do now?" There was a roll of thunder and a flash of lightning, as a big voice came from heaven, saying... "Re-paint! Re-paint! Thin no more!" Lent is a time to repent, and start over again. The wilderness is our reminder *the signposts are there!*

In the Mediterranean world where me and my cousin lived, one's identity was utterly wrapped up in the honour system of the day. The confrontation between Jesus and Satan was a classic. Jesus was tested for his loyalty. The tester is Satan, a name we give to the Persian secret-service agent, whose job was to test loyalty to the king. Jesus' test was conducted in private, but was intended to confirm publicly his honoured place in the minds and hearts of our following. My cousin Jesus held his own; the devil went slinking away. Jesus resisted by winning the challenge to his identity and his resistance has been a model for his followers up until this present time.

Faith as resistance is powerfully represented in the wilderness story of Jesus. There is good reason why we remember it on the first Sunday of Lent when we consider carefully who we are, and what is essential to our life in Christ.

A seeker after truth came for guidance. Tell me, wise one, how did you become holy?" "Two words." "And what are they, please?" "Right choices." The seeker was fascinated. "How does one learn to choose rightly?" "One word." "One word! May I have it, please?" the seeker asked. "Growth." The seeker was thrilled. "How does one grow?" "Two words." "What are they, pray tell?" "Wrong choices."

The fierce landscape of the wilderness reminds us of our need to give ourselves a test, to check that we have the spiritual stuff in us to resist the many temptations offered us- if- we would give up on the Jesus pathway of life. The wilderness is also the place where we become our truest self as we shuck off the non-essentials that test and tempt us away from following Jesus faithfully every day. Lent is such a season. (*The signposts are there.* "We have something to say. Let's say it well.") Let those who have ears, hear! Amen.



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Mark 1:9-15
March 1, 2009