

With Jesus In The Wilderness

Luke 4:1-13

This is not exactly camping season. Nevertheless, over the six weeks of Lent we are going into the wilderness as we prepare for Easter Sunday. And while we make our journey through the wilderness, we're going to tell stories, wilderness stories, from the Bible.

To get you in the mood, I found a list of camping tips by a man named Bruce Cochran which was printed in the Sept. '96 issue of *Backpacker* magazine. The list is too long to read in its entirety, so I'm only going to mention a few:

- When using a public campground, a tuba placed on your picnic table will keep the campsites on either side vacant.
- A hot rock placed in your sleeping bag will keep your feet warm. A hot enchilada works almost as well, but the cheese sticks between your toes.
- Lint from your navel makes a handy fire starter. Warning: Remove lint from navel before applying the match.
- Take this simple test to see if you qualify for solo camping. Shine a flashlight into one ear. If the beam shines out the other ear, do not go into the woods alone.
- The guitar of the noisy teenager at the next campsite makes excellent kindling.
- Bear bells provide an element of safety for hikers in grizzly country. The tricky part is getting them on the bears.ⁱ

Time in the wilderness seems to be a prerequisite for the promised land of authentic faith. You don't get to the Promised Land without first going through the wilderness.

Notice that immediately after Jesus' baptism, when he heard the voice of his Father say, "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased . . ." we read these words, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished . . ."

Time spent in the wilderness seems to be a prerequisite for a deep experience of faith. God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, where they had lived in slavery for 400 years. They headed toward the Promised Land. It was an 11-day journey, but it took them 40 years to get there. What took so long? (The women in the congregation say that Moses was a man and refused to ask for directions).

But even when Joshua took over and led them into Canaan, it was many years before they subdued it. And then when they were in the promised land and had subdued it, they couldn't keep it, and they were carried off into slavery in Babylon where they cried out, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137:4)

Our faith is a wilderness faith. It was born in struggle and hardship. Jesus was driven out into the wilderness so that he could fully experience what it meant to be a human being.

Authentic faith is not handed to us on a silver platter. Authentic faith is born in the wilderness of testing and temptation.

A writer once told of visiting an orange grove where an irrigation pump had broken down. Because the season was unusually dry, some of the trees were beginning to die for lack of water.

The man giving the tour then took the writer to his own orchard where irrigation was used sparingly. He said, "These trees could go without rain for another two weeks. That's because, when they were saplings, I frequently kept the water from them.

This hardship caused them to send their roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture at a greater depth."

Some parents are surprised when they make life as easy as possible for their children and then discover that those children don't respond in the way that the parents had hoped. Here's one of life's most important secrets: struggle in life helps to toughen us, and that matures us.

Time spent in the wilderness seems to be a prerequisite for a deep faith. If life comes too easily, if there are no challenges to overcome, no mountains to be scaled, then we live on the surface of life with no real understanding of God's love and God's sustaining power.

Jesus was driven out into the wilderness. There he was tested, just as you and I are tested in our daily lives. There seems no other way to do it. No pain, no gain.

But notice that it's the Spirit that drives Jesus into the wilderness. He's not lured into the wilderness by the Tempter. He was driven there by the Spirit. Evidently the wilderness is exactly where he was supposed to be.

People of faith always struggle with the question, "Why is there evil in the world?" Why does God permit us to suffer? Our answer is that God doesn't cause our suffering but uses our suffering to shape us into the image of God's Son.

I believe it's entirely consistent with the teachings of Jesus. "God sends His rain on the just and the unjust . . ." (Matthew 5:45)

God doesn't pick out individual people and say, 'I'm going to cause you unimaginable suffering in order to make you a better person'. If you're in pain today, I don't believe God caused it. I don't believe God works that way.

However, God did create a world in which suffering is very much a part of our lives. That says to me that suffering has its place in God's overall plan. Some hardship, some adversity seems to be necessary for spiritual growth. Granted, life in the wilderness is not easy. It's filled with tests and temptations. People respond to these tests and temptations in different ways. Some give up their faith. Some sell their souls for bread. Some bow to Satan and settle for a life of material comfort while remaining spiritually poor.

Each of us has a choice in how we will respond to life. And how we deal with our wilderness experiences reveals much of what we are inside. Some people go through the wilderness and lose their faith. Others move through the wilderness and find a closeness to God and to others that they never knew before--a faith they would not have discovered any other way.

Nina Mason Bergman struggled with multiple sclerosis and wrote a book of meditations about her experiences. In her book she explains that for a long time she saw M.S. as an obstacle that prevented her from truly loving God. She blamed all her spiritual defeats and defects on her disease.

Today that's not the case. Today she claims that she's grateful for the invasion of multiple sclerosis into her life. She says she can hardly believe that it is so, but it is. She uses this analogy:

She says their home is nestled on an acre of land back a short way from a main highway. A gravel road is the only approach. Sometimes the city sends a man and equipment to smooth out all the existing bumps in the gravel road. Then weather and wear shape new potholes and dips. The jarring places are not pleasant. Their car shakes and groans as they pass over the road. But she is glad to have that road, for it leads home.

So it has been with MS: a rough pathway to be sure, yet it has led her, she says, to an awareness of God she would not have known otherwise. She writes, "The promised grace is sufficient, and God's power does abound in my weakness. I discovered that in having less of me, I gained more of the Lord--a good trade."ⁱⁱ

It seems remarkable and me, almost incredible, that a person could give thanks for M. S., or cancer, or blindness, or any other such horrible disease, but it happens often enough that I'm forced to accept it as real. Some people discover a faith, a peace, a joy in the wilderness that they could not have found anywhere else.

All, and only, by the grace of God.

ⁱ <http://www.katscratch.com>.

ⁱⁱ *Comfort from the Cross*, p. 99.