

Four Stops in the Wilderness

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Stop One

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:9-13)

The wilderness Jesus was driven into was probably the desert south of Jericho, where the Jordan River feeds into the Dead Sea. You can see for miles in every direction there, and it is all sand-colored: the hills, the rocks, the brush, the scorpions. It is also very quiet, both because the sand absorbs sound and because there are not many living things to make any noise.

If you sit still in that desert all by yourself, then you will soon notice a mechanical humming between your ears, roughly equivalent to the sound of a small electric clock. This is the sound of your nervous system at work, with all its elaborate wiring and sparking synapses. Once you have gotten used to it, you will begin to notice how much noise you make when you breathe. Your lungs might as well be fireplace bellows, with all that wheezing in and out. When you breathe in, you can hear the wind whistling through what sounds like your hollow skull, and when you breathe out you can hear the roar it makes as it rushes out through the narrow passageway of your nose.

The beating of your heart may sound near or far, depending on your heart. I know one man who went on a camping trip in the badlands of South Dakota near the Rosebud Indian reservation. The first night he could not sleep, he said, for the beating of native drums. The second night he discovered that the drum was inside his own chest.

Not everyone's wilderness is quiet, however. Some people tell me that when they are lost in their lives the wilderness is more like a jungle than a desert. You know how it is in a jungle. You can barely see one foot ahead of you for all the knotted vines and spiky palms. You know you are lost but you do not have a clue which way to go. Even the sun is hidden by the canopy of leaves overhead. Meanwhile, the jungle is full of noise—jabbering birds, clicking insects, a howling monkey or two, plus branches breaking under the weight of who knows what—something big that may be running away from you but might just as easily be heading straight for you.

All of this is bad enough during the day, but at night it can freeze your backbone from the top of your head to the tingling flesh around your kidneys. I don't know what it is about darkness, but sometimes the physical things that are prowling around out there are not as frightening as the spiritual things that might be out there, too. If you gave me a choice between a hyena or a demon, I would choose the hyena. At least that way I would know what I was dealing with, and I might have half a chance of scaring it away.

Whatever your own wilderness is like, I am betting that it has at least three things in common with all other wildernesses: *You did not choose it.* It is no place you would ever have gone on your own. *You are not in control.* You cannot even control the pounding of your own heart. *Whether it noisy or quiet, there is one sound missing, and that is the voice of God.* It might not even seem like a wilderness to you if you could hear that voice—telling you that everything is going to be all right, that you are not alone, that it is all for a reason. But you cannot hear it, and that silence defines the wilderness.

For many people, the hardest thing to believe in the wilderness is that God has anything to do with it at all. It can feel like the exact opposite, as if God has vanished and you have been turned over to the enemy. But according to the gospel of Mark, it was the Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness—not the devil or the world but the holy spirit of God.

It happened on one of the best days of his life, too. It happened on the same day he was baptized by John in the Jordan. No sooner had Jesus come up out of the water to see that Spirit descending on him like a dove than it turned into something more like a hawk that drove him—not led him, but drove him—into the wilderness, where he spent forty days alone. Well, not quite alone. The devil was there, along with some wild beasts and a few ministering angels. But Jesus was alone in that he alone had to make sense of his situation. There was no one else to tell him what it meant, or what to do. There was no one else to take his mind off the hum in his head and the drum in his chest, not to mention all the demons and hyenas who showed up to make trouble in the middle of the night.

According to the gospel, this period in the wilderness was essential to everything that came after it for Jesus. It was a great source of his humanness as well as his holiness. Even after he left the wilderness, he carried it around inside of him, and far from fleeing it later in his life he sought it out. Without the wilderness he might not have been the same person. Because of the wilderness he was not afraid of anything.

The church—by which I mean the living body of Christ in the world—believes this so much that it has set aside a similar season in the wilderness for every one of us. None of us has to go if we do not want to. No bird will drive us into Lent. We are free to stay or to go, as we choose. If we choose to go, however, then it is time to stop pretending there is something wrong with these wildernesses of ours. It is time to stop prettying them up with potted plants and inspirational music. It is time to stop wishing we could sleep through them, or that they would just go away.

If Jesus' own life has anything to do with ours, then these deserts, these jungles, are God's own gifts to us. They are the Spirit's doing. They are offered to us for our humanness, as well as for our holiness, if only we will sit down and register where we are.

Where are you headed this Lent? Do you know what your wild beasts are? Can you hear the voices of your angels? What is the geography of your or your community's own desert?

Stop Two

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and

stood at a distance, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” (Exodus 20:18-19)

Whenever I hear people complain that God does not speak to them, I always want to say, “We asked for it, you know. God used to speak to us, but we got so scared that we begged God not to do it anymore.” The story comes from the book of Exodus, which is about Israel’s long Lent—not forty days in the wilderness but forty whole years, which is Bible shorthand for “a long, long time.” When the people were still working six days a week making mud bricks for the Egyptians, the wilderness looked like heaven to them. Imagine! No work, no whips, no foreign masters with their foreign gods—just a clear, quiet passageway to the promised land. That was before they got into it, of course. That was before the sand coated them like a second skin, before their lips cracked from too much sun and too little water, before they began to dream of Egypt.

Like people on any difficult journey, they would have preferred to sleep through it—to take a Xanax and wake up in Canaan feeling rested. Instead, they found themselves living out on the edge, where everything was exaggerated. In the wilderness, everything becomes 110% what it is. Without all the usual background noise and distraction, there is nothing to dilute reality. All of the ordinary filters do not work. What you see is what you get, and nine times out of ten you get a lot more of most things than you want.

If you have ever spent one night sleeping on the ground without an air mattress, then you know what I mean. What looked like a perfectly flat place turns out to be a fifteen-degree slant. You keep sliding down to the bottom of your sleeping bag, and when you haul yourself back up again you keep rolling over the same acorn that has already made half a dozen small bruises on your back. You can live with this as long as there are no bugs. If there are bugs, then you are finished. Under the right circumstances, one blue bottle fly can test your soul more severely than any devil, because a devil would at least provide a significant encounter, while a blue bottle fly just proves how little it takes to undo you.

Perhaps this is why the wilderness is so often a place of spiritual testing in the Bible. There, it is difficult to block anything out, since everything is larger than life—or, more precisely, since everything is finally its true size, instead of the pared-down, domesticated versions we manage to arrange for ourselves at home. Heat is hotter, bright is brighter, loud is louder and scary is scarier, as the people of Israel found out when God decided to speak to them all at once.

According to the book of Exodus, God originally spoke all of the commandments directly to the people. Moses did not read them, since they were not yet written down anywhere. Moses’ only job was to prepare the people for the voice of the Lord, which was about to be heard over a considerable commotion. The sky was full of thunder and lightning. The mountain was smoking like a live volcano, with so much rumbling going on inside of it that the ground was shaking as if it were about to split apart. Just so no one mistook this for a natural phenomenon, there was also the sound of a trumpet blasting away over all the other noise.

With no clearing of the divine throat, God suddenly began: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” On and on it went—you shall, you shall not—the

words themselves rising above the other racket so that the people would never be able to forget them even if they tried. When it was all over they quickly decided that this was not only more sound and tumult than they wanted; this was also more God than they wanted. The wilderness had worked like a bullhorn that made everything too loud and clear. They wanted the volume turned down. They wanted their filters back. Turning to Moses, they cried out with one voice, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die!"

Do not let God speak to us? They were wasting their breath saying that to Moses (as if he could put a gag order on God). But God heard them say it, and that was that. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, God never spoke to all the people at once ever again. God spoke through Moses, and later through the prophets, but the people got what they wanted. God never spoke to all of them directly again.

Those of us who follow Jesus can pretend that we have overcome our ancestors' case of bad nerves, but I am not sure that it is safe to listen yet, especially for those of us in the wilderness. What if things get really quiet and you hear someone say, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me"?

Or what if it gets really noisy again and you hear that same voice louder than thunder, saying, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep"? I am not sure that it is safe to listen yet, which may explain why God is so often hard to hear.

In your own wilderness, that one you know better than anyone else, what are you longing for God to say to you? And what are you afraid that God might say to you?

Stop Three

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. (1 Kings 19:4-5a)

Elijah went into the wilderness because the evil Queen Jezebel had a contract out on his life and he was scared to death of her. He had good reason to be. He had just staged a contest on Mount Carmel between himself—one lonely prophet of Yahweh—and 450 of the prophets of Baal, whom Jezebel worshipped. The contest was to see whose god was really God, and Elijah won. While Baal was nowhere to be found, Yahweh sent a blast of fire from heaven that no one present could deny, and Elijah marked the victory by killing every last one of the losers.

When Jezebel heard it she sent a message to Elijah, letting him know that he was about to be the next loser, and he knew her well enough to start running right then. Leaving his servant behind, he fled into the Negeb desert south of Beer-sheba, where he walked into the wilderness all by himself. According to the text, the holy spirit of God did not drive him there. His fear did, and something more than that—something that grew bigger and bigger in all that silence until he sat down under a solitary broom

tree and asked God to let him die.

Maybe it was the bloody contest on Mount Carmel. Sometimes, when you get exactly what you want, there can be a terrible vacuum afterwards. All the energy you counted on to reach your goal suddenly deserts you, and you do not have a clue what you are supposed to do next. You felt so strong going up the mountain. Now you don't know if your knees will hold you up on the way back down.

Or maybe it was just exhaustion, with one major thing happening right after another and no time to rest in between. First the prophets of Baal, then Jezebel, then the flight into the wilderness without anything to eat or drink. Separate those things by a week or so and they might be do-able, but one right on top of the other was like being in a war.

Or maybe Elijah was just tired of being a prophet. "Thank you for this call, Lord. I fully recognize the privilege of serving you, but the truth is that I am just about called out right now. With all due respect, I quit. You are going to have to call someone else to take my place, because I have just resigned."

Whatever "it" was, Elijah had had enough of it. "It is enough," he said. He was so tired of it that he asked God to take his life. Then he lay down under a broom tree and waited to die, but instead of dying he fell asleep. If you have ever suffered from depression, then you may recognize this as one of the signs. A depressed person can sleep twenty hours a day without ever feeling rested. Every time the eyes open, the brain says, "Go back to sleep. You aren't up to this. You don't want to see this. Go back to sleep."

Only in Elijah's case God would not allow it. *Tap, tap, tap*. Just about the time Elijah was drifting off to dreamland, an angel woke him up and told him to eat. Eat what? Eat the food the angel had brought—nothing fancy, just a hot pancake and a jar of water, but enough to live on. Enough not to die on. So Elijah ate the angel food in the wilderness, but he was still so tired that he fell asleep again.

Tap, tap, tap. The angel would not let him remain unconscious. "Get up and eat," the angel said, "otherwise the journey will be too much for you." So Elijah did, and then he entered his own Lent: forty days and forty nights of full consciousness in the wilderness instead of the endless sleep he had desired.

You know the rest of the story—how, at the end of that time, he was spending the night in a mountain cave when he heard the voice of God: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah gave God a very self-serving answer, about how he was there because he was the only true believer left, because everyone but him had forsaken God and now they were out to kill him. God did not feel sorry for Elijah, however. Instead, God told him to go outside and stand on the mountain, because God was about to pass by.

Elijah did not do it. He was not over his wish to disappear, but even inside his cave he could not miss the racket outside: first the wind, then the earthquake, then the fire. After the fire there was nothing at all—just sheer and total silence—which, after all that noise, had a sound all its own. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then God asked him the same question again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and Elijah gave the exact same answer as before. The entire spectacle had not changed a thing, except that Elijah was awake. He was fully conscious, and in the next sentence God gave him his new assignment, which Elijah headed down the mountain to fulfill.

In its own way it is a resurrection story, in which Elijah passes from his wish to die to his willingness to live. It all happens in the wilderness, too, which is where God does some of God's best work. How is this story your story? What would you give anything to go to sleep to, and what does God keep waking you up to? What sound of sheer silence has brought you to the mouth of your cave?

Stop Four

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." (Luke 5:29-31)

After Jesus' forty days in the wilderness were over, I am not sure that he ever really left it. He left it physically, of course. He returned to Galilee, Luke says. He traded in the hyenas and demons of the desert for their municipal counterparts, who were not the gun runners or bank robbers you might have expected but who were instead some of the most religious people in town.

Those were the people who nipped at Jesus' heels, hounding him as badly as any of the wild beasts in the desert ever had. What was their complaint? He kept bad company. He wasted his time on people who had made bad choices and who were never going to change. What was worse, he crossed professional boundaries with them. He sat around their dinner tables until late at night. He drank bottles of their wine. He listened to their sob stories, and by doing so he alienated the good people who might actually have benefited from his teaching.

It was no way for a holy man to act. If he wanted to be taken seriously, then Jesus was going to have to show better judgment: spend more time at the synagogue, chair a committee, join the Rotary Club. He was going to have to move into the center of things, with the people who could make things happen. But Jesus would not do it. He stayed out on the edges of things instead, frequenting the deserts where too many people spent their lives—deserts of paralysis and dementia, deserts of poverty and exclusion. Combing those wastelands with his twelve-man desert patrol, he scooped up bodies and revived parched souls.

Some people were out there because of their own sins and some were there because they had been sinned against, but either way Jesus treated them as if they were sick, not bad. He appointed himself their physician—their medicine man—and he did not order them to crawl out of their beds to keep their appointments with him, either. He made house calls in the desert. He went to them where they were and he laid his hands on them. He caused the dumb to speak, the lame to walk, the fast asleep to wake up.

Whether they were victims or perpetrators, his message was the same. Turn around, he said to them. Turn from what you have done to other people. Turn from what they have done to you. Be well. Be new—*now*, not later on when you have had time to work through it. The right time is not up ahead somewhere, waiting for you to get there. Your new life begins the moment you start living it.

This kind of thing drove the religious people crazy. They knew it was not as easy

as that. There were applications to be filled out, meetings to attend, requirements to be met, plus a few small fees to cover the administrative overhead. Depending on the sins being remitted, some fees might be higher than others. In some unfortunate cases, remission was out of the question. The clerks were sorry, but those were the rules. They did not make them up. They just carried them out.

So of course Jesus drove them crazy with his wilderness values. At one point he even got physical with them, popping a whip at them so that they leapt from their assigned seats in the temple and ran right out the door. This was not meanness; this was Jesus' hope that a little dose of desert might save them, too. Get out of here, his whip said. Get out where all you can hear is your own breath whistling through your nose. Get out where the silence of God is not half as frightening as the prospect of God's speech, where you would rather be knocked unconscious than hear what God has in mind for you next. Above all, get out there with people who have never lived anywhere but the wilderness, people who have learned to live on rain water and cactus buds because they have never been allowed near the center of your town. They need you, it is true. But you need them even more than they need you.

As much as we might prefer to avoid it, the wilderness is where God is. The wilderness is where God does some of God's best work. Long after his forty days in it were over, Jesus returned to refresh his vision and say his prayers. More than once a whole lot of people followed him and he fed them there, as he goes on feeding us today. May your own period in the wilderness this Lent be one in which you trust in his food, as well as in his presence. Remember: however far you go, he has been there first. Wherever you end up, he will meet you there.