

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
February 21, 2010
Luke 4:1-13

How early on in my childhood did I form the notion that the opposite of home would be the wild forest? Was it hearing the story of Hansel and Gretel, driven out of their home and into the forest by a parent who didn't want them around anymore? Or maybe hearing the story of Snow White, who also had a parent who didn't want her around anymore, and has to flee to the wild forest. Or maybe it was simply the woods I back of my childhood home in a suburb of Pittsburgh that gave me the idea of wilderness as a place with a lot of trees.

That impression lasted from early childhood until three months ago, on my Palestine of Jesus pilgrimage. It was then that I felt the impact of the wilderness described in today's gospel reading. It is a wilderness in which there is nothing but vast, empty land. No trees. No grass. Just miles and miles and miles of dry, barren dirt and the relentless heat of the sun. Your own body seems almost microscopically small and insignificant in the middle of that vast emptiness stretching out in all directions, in land that offers nothing to live on, in complete indifference whether you live or die. The loneliness might kill you if the sun and starvation didn't.

I had never been to that kind of wilderness before. And yet, I think Barbara Brown Taylor is right when she says,

"I have an idea that every one of us has already been [in the wilderness]. Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection--just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand.

Needless to say, this is not a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness

exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about.

I guess that could sound like bad news, but I don't think it is. I think it is good news--because even if no one ever wants to go there, and even if those of us who end up there want out again as soon as possible, the wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. Take Jesus, for instance.

- How did he end up there? The Spirit led him.
- What was he full of? He was full of The Holy Spirit.
- What else did he live on? Nothing.
- How long was he there? Weeks and weeks.
- How did he feel at the end? He was famished.

What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to him? It *freed* him--from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose, from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life, from any illusion he might have had that God would make his choices for him. After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else."

Taylor goes on to say that this wisdom about the value of the wilderness is lost to popular American culture, but that Lent offers us the opportunity to choose to give up our favorite anesthesia or our favorite pacifier and get 40 days of some wilderness experience, and I think that's a helpful way to look at it.

Human beings can be afraid of all sorts of things: spiders, public speaking, horror movie villains in hockey masks, ordination exams--but all the fears in our lives are learned fears except two. There are two innate fears that every human being has from the time we are newborns: the fear of loud noises, and the fear of falling.

I was reminded of this on Monday when I found myself thirty feet above the ground clinging to tiny footholds and handholds on a rock climbing wall. Jeff, another faculty spouse at St. Margaret's had suggested that since our kids were out of school for Presidents' Day we could take them to an enormous indoor rock climbing center outside of Richmond. I had said, "Sure, it sounds like fun!" But when I got halfway up that wall, I thought, "Hey, this is scary." And I still had a long way to go, all of it higher. I knew that Jeff was standing on solid ground and was very capable with my belay ropes. As I kept climbing, I found myself asking, "Jeff, could I just hang here for a little while?" I

half convinced myself that the reason for that was that I was getting tired. Jeff said, “Sure, I’ve got ya.” And I let go of the footholds and handholds and just felt the not-falling. I hung there for a while, feeling that despite the primal fear of falling, I could trust the ropes, and I could trust Jeff. Then after a little while I said, “okay” and began climbing again. I had let go of the handholds and I had not died.

We say that the devil tested Jesus in the wilderness, and that’s true. But in addition to that, Jesus is also testing the Holy Spirit, trusting that in the middle of his deepest fears, the Holy Spirit will hold him up and keep him alive. In going into the wilderness, Jesus lets go of every handhold and foothold, and allows himself to be held by the Holy Spirit. It is preparation for his ministry.

The March issue of Real Simple magazine printed dozens of readers’ answers to the question, “What is the beauty product you can’t live without?” Lent offers us an alternative to this kind of thinking: an opportunity to experience the truth that we can live without our favorite beauty product, and in fact we can live without just about everything we thought we couldn’t live without. Lent gives us forty days in which we can let go of the handholds we thought we needed to cling to, and simply rely on the Holy Spirit. Remembering that we are imitating the wilderness experience of Jesus reminds us that we too are discovering in ourselves clarity and grit that are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It was the day after our climbing trip when Jeff saw me in the St. Margaret’s dining hall. He told me that he has often taken church youth groups on rock climbing trips, and on those trips he gives them a talk about how Jesus is our belayer. Having climbed those heights himself, Jesus knows the primal fear we feel; having let go of the handholds Jesus knows the trust that is required. Jesus knows that even the most skilled climbers fall sometimes, and that’s why we need a belayer: to catch us and give us the chance to keep climbing. The wilderness may seem like a forest into which we have been sent by a parent who wants to destroy us. But our true parent loves us dearly, and wants us to live, despite our fears, and so sends us Jesus as a belayer. When the wilderness in our lives seems too much, remember Jesus telling us, “I got ya.”