

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Wilderness Time

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was famished. – Matthew 4:1-11

The biblical story of the Exodus tells of how the Israelites endured forty years of wilderness, as they made their way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. It was a difficult time for them, because the wilderness holds few comforts, but it was an important time, because they needed to unlearn the ways of slavery and learn how to live free. When something is deeply engrained in you, it might take some time to unlearn it. You may have heard the saying, “you can take the girl out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the girl.” Well, I don’t know why you’d want to take the country out of the girl, but you can - it just isn’t easy. You need wilderness time to unlearn some things. And that is true about a lot of things:

- You can get the child out of the abuse, but it isn’t easy to get the abuse out of the child. You need wilderness time.
- You can get the man out of prison, but it isn’t easy to get the prison out of the man. You need wilderness time.
- You can get a person out of a toxic work place, but it isn’t easy to get the toxic workplace out of the person. You need wilderness time.
- You can get yourself out of a bad marriage, but it isn’t easy to get the bad marriage out of your head. You need wilderness time.

Moses and Miriam and God took the people out of slavery, but it took them forty years to get the slavery out of the people. But it isn’t just bad things that we might need time to leave behind. Any significant transition requires a time of wilderness, a time between the ending and the new beginning, so that what is new is really new and not just a repetition of the old.

- After a death of a loved one or a divorce people usually need a wilderness time to grieve the ending, so that they can enter into a new relationship as a healthy and whole person.
- Young adulthood is often a transition time, a wilderness time between leaving home and making long term commitments of our own.
- In the church, after a pastor moves on, a congregation often needs a wilderness time so it can recommit to a new relationship rather than just reacting to the old one. That can be important after a difficult relationship, or after a particularly successful relationship. I know that over the past couple of years in this congregation, you needed a transition minister, Peter,

to help you get to a healthy place. For many of you that felt like a wilderness time, a barren time, but it was also a profoundly important time for you. And so far, my sense is that you are in a healthy place.

Perhaps you've had a wonderful career and now you've retired, but you need to learn what it means to be a person who is not defined by your job. Perhaps a marriage or a job has ended, or a loved one has died, or a life-long dream has had to be abandoned. Perhaps a conflict with someone at work or home or in the community is sapping all of the energy and joy from life. Perhaps it is a physical illness that keeps us from the people and things that bring us joy, or a mental illness that steals the joy from everything. Perhaps it is a time of inner conflict, or temptation or difficult choices. Such times are wilderness times, times of struggle and heartache, times when life is simply endured in hope of a better tomorrow. Wilderness times are times to let go of what is past, whether it is bad or good, and discover what is really essential about who we truly are.

And that is why wilderness times, as difficult as they are, are often important times of growth and healing. And that is why following his baptism, Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness, fasting. Forty days instead of forty years, but the goal is the same, to get the slavery out of his soul. Jesus grew up in a system of domination defined by Roman empire and Herodian aristocracy, and it had got into his soul. He went out into the wilderness to get it out of his soul, to discover what was really essential about who he truly was. And ever since, his followers have set aside this forty days prior to Easter to enter our own spiritual wilderness, to help get the negative stuff out of our souls, to discover what is really essential about who we truly are. It isn't easy, but it is important. Without wilderness times we will always be enslaved to the way things have been. Wilderness sets us free.

It is no accident that Jesus' wilderness time comes at the beginning of his ministry, because in order to truly offer the best of himself, he had to be free. It wasn't enough to get out of Galilee, he had to get Galilee out of his head. It wasn't enough to get out of his family home, he had to get the patriarchal family values out of his heart. It wasn't enough to get away from being a landless peasant, he had to get the sense that landless peasants were unimportant out of his soul.

And that, I think, is what the temptations are about. Naming, facing and rejecting our temptations are the ways we let go of the patterns of thinking and living that keep us enslaved to the way things have been, and set ourselves free. Jesus has been fasting for forty days, and the first temptation is to assuage his hunger, and not just his hunger, but the daily hunger faced by so many of his friends and neighbours. He could be a prophet like Moses, who fed his people manna in their wilderness. It is the temptation of easy charity, but it ultimately doesn't transform

people's lives because it doesn't transform their desires, their expectations, their lives.

The next temptation is that of easy religion, to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in an act of apparent complete faith, and so to fulfill the prophet Malachi's prediction that the Messiah would appear suddenly in the temple. But Jesus realizes that such a display of faith is really an act of non-faith, a testing of God rather than confidence in God. It too, proves to be an easy, but false path to God.

The third temptation is the temptation of easy power, to become a king like David, or an emperor like Caesar, with all of the opportunities that power creates, but Jesus realizes that easy power involves a high cost, the cost of worshipping the gods of militarism and violence.

At this, the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus has to reject the conventional but false wisdom about what success and power were, before he could begin to get a sense of God's way of success and power. He had to reject the easy but superficial ways, in order to understand the more difficult but profound way of life. In order to say Yes to God, he first had to say No to the voice of the tempter.

In the same way, most of the temptations that face us are the temptations to seek fulfillment in ways that ultimately cannot provide that fulfillment. Sexual temptation is the search for pleasure and intimacy without the struggle of relationship and commitment. Temptations to eat chocolate or fatty foods often have little to do with physical hunger and everything to do with emotional hungers. And often advertising tempts us to seek freedom or adventure by buying a car or other object that we all rationally know will never actually give us freedom or adventure.

Many of the temptations that we face however, are not the obvious things that we think of when we think of temptations. Everyone in Jesus' time expected the Messiah to be like Moses or David, and most people went along with those expectations. In the same way today, there are some things that everyone just takes for granted which are still something short of the life to which God calls us.

Temptations are not just individual. They are also social, ways in which we are tempted as communities and societies. We are tempted as a society to define our well-being in strictly economic terms, and so we neglect social justice and environmental health. It is much easier to allow everyone to go their own way than to do the hard work of discerning the common good. It is much easier to promote an easy, superficial tolerance of our differences than to build a genuine community.

In these forty days of Lent, we are called to reject the easy but ultimately false roads that constantly tempt us, and to seek to discern the true but difficult path which God places before us. We are called to enter into our own wilderness time, not something forced on us, but something freely chosen. Fasting (giving something up) is the traditional method of marking this time. Some people fast by giving up wine or chocolate. My sister-in-law gives up meat every Lent. But I wonder whether in our time and culture, the most important thing for many of us to give up may be our busy-ness, filling every moment so that we never have time to pause and reflect. Just as children need time to play, so adults need time to dream. When we are so busy, we are trapped; in order to be free, we need to create Sabbath time in our lives, wilderness times when we can dream, ponder and reflect on where God is calling us.

That doesn't have to be during Lent of course. A friend of mine, who is a social entrepreneur (a person who starts socially progressive businesses), credits a lot of his creativity and business success to a week-long silent retreat that he takes every year. A minister I know never answers the phone before 10 in the morning. He keeps that time before ten as a mini-Lent every day, a time without distractions. I know a woman who runs several miles a day, and prays as she runs.

This year Alberta and Northwest Conference of the United Church is inviting each of us to observe Lent as a season of prayer. We are invited to spend a little time each day in a conscious practice of meditation and prayer, to create a little space for wilderness time, when you can let go of all that binds you, so that you can be truly free. If you don't already start your day with a morning devotion, or end it with an evening devotion, I invite you to try it. There are lots of ways to pray: light a candle, still your heart, read a few verses from the Bible or a devotional guide, ponder the words to a favorite hymn, practice yoga or tai chi, go for a walk, create art, play, just for a few minutes every day, whatever helps you to align your heart with that of God. During the quiet moments in this service, I invite you to think about how you can walk the wilderness way with Jesus over the remaining 36 days of Lent. Amen.