

Wilderness experience

Delivered February 21, 2010

Scripture passage: Luke 4:1-13

As you may know, this past week I visited my daughter in Sacramento, California. We spent our time together doing the sightseeing thing. We took a bike tour of some wineries in the Napa Valley, we drove over the Golden Gate Bridge, we visited San Francisco. One place we spent considerable time was the Muir Redwood Forest, not too very far from San Francisco. In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt designated this old-growth redwood forest as the United State's 10th National Monument. And he named it after the famous conservationist John Muir. He made it a national monument for good reason. It is an impressive thing, that forest. Today it is preserved as a testament to God's great power and creativity.

Some of the redwood trees in the Muir Forest are so huge that if you carved one out, you could easily fit a whole volley ball team inside with room to spare; some are as tall as 60 basketball players standing on each others' shoulders; some are so old that they predate Jesus by over a thousand years. Because of their age, I think, the Redwoods seem wise-like if we only knew the right language, or had keener hearing, they could impart great wisdom to us.

A little area of the forest has been roped off and marked with a sign—how glaringly manmade is that! The sign gives to that space the name “cathedral grove.” We were asked to maintain a respectful silence there and we did. The only sounds were the crunch of feet on gravel and the soft drips of morning dew sliding off overhead branches and splashing gently on the ground and shrubbery below.

Friendly is not the word I'd use to describe that woods—but neither would I call it sinister or forbidding, as I've often thought the wilderness Jesus went to, or was driven to, must have been. Awe-inspiring or even sacred are better words to describe the Redwood forest. These are perhaps better words to describe the place to which Jesus retreated, too. He was led by the Spirit to a place of holy solitude, where he could try to get his bearings about the baptism he had just experienced.

Remember, when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, the heavens opened up and a voice from above announced, “You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” What better place to come to grips with that startling bit of information than in a forest? In a forest, Shakespeare says, we are exempt from public haunt—in the woods, says Shakespeare, we are able to find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks and sermons in stones.” And of course, who has spoken the trees into being, authored the running brooks and preached the sermons in stones, if not God? Yes, certainly, forests and wildernesses are sacred places. The Celts know that there are places where the veil between heaven and earth is especially thin. Forests are thin places where God's grace can shine through from heaven to us who are earth bound, earthy and definitely earthly creatures.

Our story for today relates that although God created the forest to which Jesus retreated, and the Holy Spirit accompanied Jesus in the forest, Satan was there, too.

We have here, then, in this particular wilderness, the trinity (God, Jesus and Holy Spirit) plus one. Carl Jung, that famous Psychologist of the last century has suggested that rather than a trinity, early Christians would have done better to develop the concept of a quaternity—for certainly evil is an important spiritual force to be reckoned with in our world. Far be it for us, though, to make such a drastic change to our church traditions by dismissing our beloved Trinitarian symbols. Since we DO lack the quaternity in our faith traditions, though, this story adds some balance to our Trinitarian faith. It is good to spend time reflecting on this story, which in fact has special prominence in the Bible, coming as it does at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is also a story found in three of the four gospels. Without this story, and its emphasis on evil, we run the risk of leading overly optimistic, shall we say, naïve, spiritual lives. With it, we are forced to recognize and even tip our hats to evil and its sway over us. If we don't give it sufficient respect, we won't be motivated to apply our inner resources to countering and perhaps defeating it.

In our story for today, evil is personified as the devil, although "a seductive inner voice" is probably closer to the truth. Jesus was, after all, human and we humans are not lucky enough to have spiritual opponents who are so easily identified and who are outside us—who we can easily dismiss by simply walking away. Would that we WERE able, though, to identify evil as a flesh and blood opponent. Would that we could pick him out in a crowd, or finger him in a police lineup-- then our own lives would be oh, so much easier. But no, for us as also for Jesus, evil is too often that which resides inside us—in our heads and even in our hearts. It wraps itself around our egos, and messes with our subconscious. Evil confuses us. M. Scott Peck says that evil's primary attack method is to so confuse that we can no longer distinguish between right and wrong.

Jesus is put to three tests in the space of his 40 day wanderings. Did you catch the author Luke's wink wink, here? Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness before beginning his ministry, the Hebrews spent 40 years in the wilderness before arriving in the Promised Land. You see the parallel. Jesus' first test has to do with making bread to feed his own hunger. The second has to do with idolatry—worshiping Satan rather than God; and the third has to do with testing God—which God counts as a sin. "Do not test the Lord your god." Just so, during the 40 years wilderness sojourn to Canaan, the Hebrew people cried for bread and received manna from heaven, they engaged in idolatry by worshiping a golden calf, and they tested God by demanding that God give them water to drink. The Hebrews didn't fare too well in these tests, or temptations, but Jesus, I think you'll agree, passes with flying colors. And that's what Luke expects us to conclude. Jesus succeeded where the Hebrews failed. It remains to be seen, if we would fare as well in our own lives—in our own wilderness experiences.

Someone has said, and see if you don't agree, that taken together, these "temptations or tests" are really illusions that Satan has presented to Jesus as the real thing. You hungry? Then use your power for personal creature comforts. That's what your power is good for. You want even more power? Then stick with me, Bub. Worship me and I will give you power beyond your imaginings. You want to put those religious leaders in Jerusalem in their places? Then jump off the tower at the temple—strut your stuff.

But Jesus saw through the illusions. And that is our primary task in our struggle against evil, isn't it?—to see through the lies that others offer up as truth and our own self-delusions. You think God is primary in your life? Think again. What is it that YOU idolize? Is it money, cars, your own children? What are your addictions? Is it booze, or is it shopping? Is it blaming, or even taking care of other people? Everyone of us has an addiction, it's just that we delude ourselves in believing that our addictions are strengths—that we have control over them, not them over us. As someone has said, “to come to terms with illusion is one of the great jobs of our lives: to discern what is fantasy and what is reality, what is dead and what is alive, what is a narcotic and what is food, what are stones and what is bread.” Yes, it is dangerous, wrenching and unavoidable, this struggle that we have, as Christians, as Christ followers, trying to discern truth from that which is illusory.

In this season of Lent, then, we are led by scripture into the wilderness—to meet with a quaternity of spirits. The bad news is, the devil will be there. The good news is, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit will be there, too. Maybe you will follow a back road to a real forest in which to meditate—and like Shakespeare you too will find sermons in stone; or, maybe your wilderness will be far less romantic—maybe just a chair, a reading lamp, and a Bible. That's ok, too. Just make sure the chair isn't too comfortable. Our wilderness experiences are not supposed to be comfortable—and forego that chocolate bar and glass of wine, too. Man is not made of bread alone remember—

Then, face those illusions and your self delusions and spend some time focusing on crucifixion. If it all gets to be too much for you, remember that Easter is only a few short weeks away.

One last thing about Muir Woods. There were some gigantic redwoods that had, sad to say, given up the ghost. They lay on the ground, in various states of decay, so huge still, that paths had been cut around them, rather than through them. Daughter Paige and I noted that where one giant redwood had formerly stood, a ring of small trees fed by the decomposition of the former, were now reaching their branches toward the sky. So from the old, sprouts the new. That my friends, is resurrection. Something to look forward to as we begin our Lenten season. Amen