

When the Promised Land Turns Out To Be a Wilderness

Deuteronomy 26:1-15; Luke 4:1-13

CWZepp, BWCOB, February 14, 2016

Barbara Brown Taylor begins her sermon entitled “*Lenten Discipline*” like this¹:

Do not bother looking for Lent in your Bible dictionary, because there was no such thing back then. There is some evidence that early Christians fasted forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith.

When the world did not end as Jesus himself had said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God the way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth....

Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for – if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy. And God moaned out loud.

Hearing that, someone suggested it was time to call Christians back to their senses, and the Bible offered some clues about how to do that. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Elijah spent forty days there before hearing the still, small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent forty days listening to God give the law. There was also Luke’s story about Jesus’ own forty days in the wilderness – a period of preparation between his baptism and his ministry – during which he was sorely tested by the devil...

*So the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *Lenten*, meaning “spring” – not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone...*

Now the truth is, not all of us need to go looking for wilderness experiences. For some of us, the wilderness comes to us, unbidden and unsought, and not in a predictable season each spring. But it is for just such times that the season of Lent is designed to prepare us.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “*Lenten Discipline*” in *Home By Another Way*. pp 65-66.

Those of you who have been listening to me preach over the years have heard me speak often about the impact of my grandfather in my life and faith. And so I was touched by this story of wilderness told by the Reverend Christopher Girata. I share in his own words²:

We all walk through a significant wilderness at one time or another, and thinking about a true wilderness experience makes me think of my grandfather. My grandfather had a significant impact on my life. He was a very good man, a child of the Great Depression who served courageously in World War II. And after returning from the war, he met a feisty young lady who would become his wife of over 60 years, and together, they had three daughters. My grandfather was a typically quiet man, a very hard worker who became a successful business owner at a young age. He had all the things he was supposed to have and lived the kind of life people work hard to build. Life was good.

Then one day, as his oldest daughter, just a teenager at the time, was riding in a car with some friends, the driver lost control. As the car flipped off the road, all four passengers were thrown out. Three of them walked away from the accident, but the car rolled over my Aunt Nancy. Nancy was rushed to the hospital where she lay in critical condition for a few days before my grandfather and grandmother made the impossible decision to end life-support. In an instant, the life they had built changed forever.

My mother, who was barely a teenager when her older sister died, said that my grandfather never really talked about the accident. He simply got quieter and worked harder. Years ago, as I was beginning my life as a priest, I asked my grandfather how it felt to lose a child in such a tragic way. He was quiet for a few minutes and then told me about the years that followed Nancy's death. He said that losing Nancy was the worst experience of his life and made him question everything. He had always been a church-going man, but when he lost Nancy, he didn't want to go back to church. He said he realized that his faith wasn't much deeper than obligation--that he had been going to church and being kind and good and charitable only because he was supposed to be, not because of any real, deep faith. He spent years questioning God, angry with God for taking his child. He was confused and hurt and the anger was overwhelming--he was truly in his personal wilderness.

Then one day, he said, something changed – changed inside him. One day, he realized that his anger and hurt were all because he thought he knew how life was supposed to work. He thought that if he lived a good life, an upstanding life, and if he worked hard, then he should expect, even deserved, good things in return. He finally realized that he had been cutting a deal with God, rather than trusting God. He told me that he realized he had a choice--either he could ignore God's presence in his life and let anger control him, or he could accept that God was there, that God was always there, and trust that God's presence with him was all he really needed. My grandfather had been in the greatest wilderness of his life, walking a journey that was raw and exposed, and he was tempted with the most significant of all temptations--that God cannot be trusted.

The truth is that there is a direct link between trust and temptation. To the degree that we can trust God for our daily needs, our sense of purpose, our identity as a beloved child of God, the temptations of the world will have little appeal. But to the degree that we allow our natural insecurity to lead us to mistrust God, we become open to the deception and

² Christopher Girata. "The Good Choice." *Day1*. Available online: http://day1.org/7052-the_good_choice

temptation that life is all up to us, that God is nothing more than a figment of our cultural imagination and so we had better take things into our own hands.

For my grandfather, he came to a point when he knew he could continue living in spite of God, or he could open himself up to trust that God was with him, that God loved him, and that God would never leave him alone. And he said he made the choice to trust God again, even though he knew that building that trust would take time and would take work and that he would have to remain faithful not to God, but to the choice to live with God. And so he did...

Choosing to trust God is never easy, and that choice is never made in a simple moment. But making that choice each and every day will create a good habit of faith and will give us the strength we need to travel through the wilderness periods in our own lives. Answering the call to trust God, to live with God, will develop the core we need to resist life's greatest temptations so that we can fulfill our purpose, our true calling.

Many of us live according to the mistaken assumption that the Promised Land is a final destination. Many of us are subconsciously convinced that the blessings of life are our rewards for a life well-lived, rewards for faithfulness and righteousness – or “clean-living” as my own Grandfather used to jest. Many of us embrace the idea found in our text from Deuteronomy today that the days of wandering and affliction and toil really belonged to our ancestors, and that if we just remember the stories, give our tithes, and keep the commandments, then we have every right to demand the blessings of God promised to those brought into the Promised Land with “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm³.”

But when the memory of signs and wonders and plenty fade, we become complacent. And when the flow of milk and honey dries up, we become hungry and thirsty. And when the blessings of God are yanked away from us – or just seem far away – we become lost, and turn to anger or despair.

And so we have been given the season of Lent, that season that Barbara Brown Taylor calls “*Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone...*”⁴

So that when the “Promised Land” to which we feel entitled turns out to be a wilderness, we will be ready. Ready to say to the voices that tell us that we should not be hungry that “one does not live by bread alone.”⁵ Ready to respond to the voices that urge compromise as a way to control our destiny with the reminder to “worship the Lord, and serve only God.”⁶ Ready to resist the temptation to believe the voices suggesting that God would not allow misfortune to befall the faithful, by remembering that even Jesus faced such temptation, but held fast to the admonition to “not put the Lord your God to the test.”⁷

³ Deuteronomy 26:8

⁴ Taylor, p. 66.

⁵ Luke 4:4

⁶ Luke 4:8

⁷ Luke 4:12

At its best, Lent prepares us for those times when the Promised Land – for which we all hope and for which we all strive – turns out to be a wilderness. And it prepares us to resist the temptation that threatens the heart of all faithful living – the temptation to give up. To give up our faith and our values. To give up our hope or our joy. To give up our trust in God.

So in this season of Lent, may we follow Jesus into and through the wilderness. May we resist the temptation to try to find a better way. And may we trust in the God who has promised to never leave us or forsake us, and who is indeed with us every step of the way – no matter what.

Amen.