

Learning Through Temptation
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I don't know many people who prefer Lent to Advent and Christmas. After all, why would you welcome a season of penance that looks forward to death on a cross rather than one where we celebrate the birth of a baby. And gifts--don't forget the gifts!

So here we are, launched into our 40 days and 40 nights...once again. 40 is Biblical for a time of intense spiritual activity leading to transformation. The Israelites were in the wilderness forty years. Moses spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai, Elijah journeyed forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb, and it rained on Noah's ark for 40 days and nights. In the wilderness; uncharted territory; transformation.

Author and theologian Frederick Buechner notes that we tend to relegate mythological stories such as Noah's Ark to children's story time rather than try to comprehend them as adults. But our lectionary today insists that we connect the covenant of God with Noah to Jesus' ministry. I want to begin my discussion of Jesus' desert journey with a key idea from a sermon delivered by Buechner.

In it he says that the standard relationships people had with the gods in the time of the early Jews was one of judgment and retribution. The main avenue humans had to appease the gods was to offer sacrifices. In some ways the story from the Hebrew scriptures starts in a similar way. God begins the Noah episode with the standard "you've been bad so you're going to suffer" strategy. But then

God changes his mind and says “never more!” Through this powerful story the Jews express their realization that God loves us no matter what; and God wants us to learn to love him and each other.

How? How can we learn this? Enter Jesus, who shows us. It begins in a desert where we, like Jesus, will be tempted. Sorely tempted.

Mark, the first gospel written and a major source for the writers of Matthew and Luke, is often brief, short on details in comparison with the others. But that can be helpful to make the central message clear. It is revealed to Jesus in his baptism that he is on the right path. He is driven to the wilderness where he is tested and hardened spiritually (for 40 days!), and then he gets on to his ministry of proclaiming the Good News.

Recently, with the release of yet another “Star Wars” movie, much has been made of the theme of the hero’s journey, the difficult path from childhood to adulthood. This perennial myth is about the journey from immaturity to maturity, from ego-centeredness to being willing and able to sacrifice for others. In “The Last Jedi” a new female hero calls the old, tired and failed hero, Luke Skywalker himself, to step up and fulfill his destiny. In like manner, Jesus’ journey here is a universal trope not only in the Bible, but in many religious traditions: diving into the unknown and forbidding spiritual realm to be transformed into a different person, one whose life is no longer his or her own.

Let’s look at this telescoped story in more detail. Mark doesn’t tell us that everyone present at Jesus’ baptism heard the voice and saw the dove; rather,

Jesus alone experiences this epiphany. Much of the spiritual hero's journey is inward. Others might notice changes, but the profundity of the changes is private.

You may have heard that Pope Francis, along with other theologians, is lobbying to change the Lord's Prayer: eliminate or change the wording on "...lead us not into temptation." They're right: Surely a good God would not lead us to temptation! But it seems that this is exactly what happens to Jesus according to Mark. How can we square this circle? What gives? (By the way, I don't think blaming it on Satan helps!)

The key, I think, is to understand the meaning of 'temptation'. Luke's version of the wilderness story is explicit in naming the types of temptations Jesus experiences, and they're universal challenges to anyone on a spiritual journey. They include using one's spiritual power for personal gain, whether for hero worship or for performing miracles or becoming a political hero (get rid of the Romans!). In every spiritual tradition, these sort of ego-enhancing, power-grabbing uses of spirituality are viewed as seductive temptations. For in the end, the outcome of the spiritual quest must be a giving up of ego-centeredness and taking on the mantle of the holy--that is, to identify with and love everything and everyone and become an emissary of God. Not a very desirable path for our egos! And ripe therefore for temptations.

Another way of looking at Jesus' wilderness journey is that spiritual work is hard. Great suffering is inevitable. The temptations to quit, to get it wrong, to misuse what one learns and becomes are ubiquitous. That's why serious seekers need a guide and strong support. The journey inward is not for sissies!

And it is not a one-time affair. The Buddha took three years to reach enlightenment once he overcame some false starts (temptations). He kept meditating daily to keep in touch with the holiness he had found. He spent long periods in spiritual retreat every year. In the Gospels, Jesus retreats repeatedly to pray, to continue his spiritual strengthening during his three-year ministry.

In January we all renewed our baptismal vows. We proclaimed, in effect, that we no longer will approach the world through the dictates of our egos. We are now God's people. Like Jesus we are dedicated to furthering God's kingdom. And like Jesus we now have the opportunity to dive into our spiritual lives seeking the transformation he and the many who followed him experienced.

One of the Lenten practices we are encouraged to do is to give up something, be it alcohol or smoking, anger or incessant web browsing. I think this is a good start, but what we must let go of is our ego and then embrace (be embraced by) the spirit that fills everything. The emptying of ourselves that is needed results in our leaving behind bad practices, not the other way around.

So let us dive into Lent. We have forty whole days for finding out what life is like without the usual painkillers, which is how most of us learn what led us to use them in the first place. Once you take the headphones off, silence can be really *loud*. Once you turn off the television, a night can get really *long*. After a while you can start thinking that all of this quiet emptiness or, worst case, all this howling wilderness, is a sign of things gone badly wrong: devil on the loose, *huge* temptations, or, as Elizabeth said in her Ash Wednesday sermon, God gone AWOL.

If nothing else, our Lenten disciplines can help us gain some self-understanding. A voluntary trip to the desert this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of those devils for life--not only because it is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot save you, but also because it is where you learn to trust the Spirit. It led you into the desert, and it will lead you out again.

Unfortunately, too much of Christianity for centuries has emphasized Jesus' divinity and has located the Kingdom of God elsewhere, to be experienced after we die. Thankfully, a growing number of Christian thinkers are emphasizing Jesus' humanity: he came to help us learn to be fully human. Here. Now. To enter deep inner union with the holy is to become more fully human.

One way of explaining this is to say that Jesus was a radical mystic. His way of spiritual change is the way of the mystic, and the Kingdom he proclaims happens in the now when people follow him into the spiritual desert of struggle and transformation. He is also radical politically because the turn from self-centeredness and its many manifestations will change how we are in the world: humble, loving and inclusive, non-materialistic and not seeking power.

Mark tells us the outline of Jesus' journey. A journey that can be ours these 40 days of Lent, 2018...and beyond. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus all the way to the cross needs the kind of clarity and grit that is found only in the wilderness. As we begin our Lenten practices, may we all enter the desert. May we learn the lessons that Jesus learned there. Amen