

“In the Wilderness” / Luke 4:1-13 / 17 February 2013

Turn these stones into bread? Throw yourself off this ledge? Bow down and worship me? Honestly, I don't see why this story is called “The Temptation of Jesus.” None of that stuff sounds very tempting to me. Turn these stones into donuts, maybe. Or sausage calzones. Each year, as we journey into the forty days of Lent, we begin with this strange story about Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, where he was tempted. But tempted by what? Bread? Suicide? Devil worship? No, Jesus was at a crossroads in his life, and his greatest temptation was to scramble back home to Nazareth, take the “closed” sign off his carpenter's shop, and go on living as he always had. He was tempted to live quietly, let someone else tackle this world's problems. He was tempted to be something far less than he was meant to be. It's a temptation that you and I know right well. That's why we, too, need to make our occasional sojourns into the wilderness.

Well, I cannot claim to have been a Boy Scout. My brother and I made it as far as Webelos when we moved to a new town and never took it back up. My memories of scouting revolve around the Pinewood Derby. Every year we would be sent home with a block of wood, four wheels, and four nails to make our downhill racecars. And each year, I would hack away at that block of wood until my father, watching from afar, could stand it no longer. My father was an instructor at the Pittsburgh Art Institute. He loved symmetry, and proportion, and balance. And so each year he swooped, grabbed the block of wood and the knife, and proceeded to create a racecar of great beauty...and great slowness. I always had the most beautiful car at the Pinewood Derby. I don't know if they give out prizes for that nowadays, but in the 1970s, they did not—especially for a racecar that was so obviously not carved by the hands of a nine-year-old.

No, I wasn't a Scout for long, and I always believed that the Scouts' winter camping—called “Klondike Camp”—sounded like something that was dreamed up by Heinrich Himmler. And yet, about six years ago, the Great North Woods of Pennsylvania began to work a kind of wonder in my spirit. And now, every year in January or February, we return to the forest for something I call my Midwinter Pilgrimage. Okay, I say “we,” but truth be told, my wife stays in the cabin and cuts out coupons by the fire while my daughters play with their iPods. This past year, when I returned to the forest, it was about seven degrees. On the first day out, I found myself shimmying across a snow-covered fallen tree, six feet above a frozen creek, and when I reached the middle of that dubious bridge, I nearly lost my balance. I imagined the headlines. I imagined myself plunging headlong through the ice, and I paused to ask myself, “Why is it that I do this?” I who have a warm home, a loving family, all the comforts of the 21st century? Nothing in life requires me to be out here.

But for me, just before Lent begins, in the deep stillness of the winter, it truly is a pilgrimage, a holy journey. I take a stick and a bottle of water, and I trek out as far into the forest as I can go. Then I find a good place to remain still for a long time. And there I stay, in the quiet and the solitude of the hemlocks, the brooks all frozen into silence, profoundest silence, not a bug, not a bird, not another person for miles. And at those times I know why Jesus spent his forty days in the wilderness before taking up his heavy burden of rescuing this world from itself, his task of speaking out against its injustices, of challenging its status quo. He was finding the courage to be the person he was meant to be. There is a kind of boldness, a kind of courage, there is a kind of action that can *only* be born of silence. There is a kind of wonder that will nourish our souls, and give us

hope for tomorrow, but we can *only* find it if we will sit in silence for a time—perhaps a long time—and wait for it. That’s one purpose of the wilderness.

Where will you find the courage to be the person you’re meant to be?

Some people are surprised by the suggestion that Jesus went out into the wilderness on a vision quest, but what else would you call it? He’s been a carpenter for all these years, a craftsman who toils with hammer and saw. The forceful preaching of that desert hermit, John the Baptist, inspires Jesus so deeply that he decides to get baptized. Coming up out of the water, he undergoes a religious experience, an ecstatic vision, so moving and so troubling that he flees out into the wilderness for forty days to meditate on it. His life is about to change. No longer can he live his life quietly and die his death serenely. No, he has a new and larger vision for the well-being of the world. The great question before him is, “Do I remain as I have been, or do I step up and enter the great struggle for what is good?”

And that’s why the tempter comes at him with that menacing little word “if.” “Ooh, if you’re so great, Jesus-the-Carpenter, then do some magic! If you’re anything more than a famished, illiterate peasant, with sawdust in your beard, then prove it. Fly like an angel; wield some power; command armies like an emperor. If! If you’re so special, prove it.” I don’t believe that Jesus really was tempted to do magic, or to become powerful, or to fly. No, when Jesus was faced with that terrible little word “if,” I think his great temptation, was much like ours: Chicken out and go home. Grow old happily, die a private death at home, in his own bed; let the world die its many deaths. Jesus’ temptation was not to bread, or human flight, or power, but to despair of his own ability to make a difference. And in the quiet of the wilderness he found the strength to resist.

And you! Where will you find the strength to resist? Will you remain as you have been, or will you resist the easy urge to live only for yourself? When you are faced with that overwhelming temptation to withdraw from this world’s fray, to let this world die its many deaths, to go selfishly about your own small and comfortable routines, how will you resist that temptation? How will you find courage to be the person you’re meant to be? Here at the beginning of this season of Lent, I invite you to find your strength, your well-being, find *yourself* first of all in silence, long, deep silence.

You see, our lives too are cluttered by so many ifs. Recently on the Internet, I discovered something that was entitled “A Meditation for Lent.” It said this: “If you can start the day without caffeine or pills, if you can understand when loved ones are too busy to spare time for you, if you can take criticism and blame without resentment, if you can face the world without lies or deceit, if you can relax without alcohol, if you can sleep peacefully without the aid of drugs, if you can do all these things, then you are probably the family dog.” If! It’s the smallest of words in every language I know of. And yet, “if” is the axis on which the world turns. That changeable, cantankerous little word, if! “If you hadn’t failed as a mother, your child wouldn’t be in so much trouble. If you’re a real man, then why couldn’t you protect, why couldn’t you provide? If you’re so special, then how come there’s not a bigger price tag attached to your W-2? If you’re so great, if you’re going to make such a big difference in this world, then how come no one listens when you talk? If you matter, then prove it!”

There are happier ifs that keep us from doing our work in this world. My big if for the last four years has been, “If I can just get my dissertation done, then I’ll start volunteering more, giving more, doing more.” I’ve only got three months left of that

excuse! What then? We put off our duties by use of that word if. If I can just get through school, if I can reach this goal, attain this thing or that. If!

We can only confront our many ifs as the lies that they are when we immerse ourselves in deep silence, for it is in silence that we will know the presence and the way of God. In yesterday's edition of the comic strip "Dilbert," which mocks corporate life, the unethical consultant is speaking to the unscrupulous manager, and he says, "Experts say we need to empower employees with 'values,' whatever the heck those are." And the pointy-haired manager replies, "I think it's like 'Don't run with scissors'." And the consultant says, "Let's start with that and see if they stop asking for raises." Money is our society's driving force. Our world has been bought and sold so many times. The world stands in need of the people we are tempted not to become. I tell you, in this world, more hope dies unnoticed as the TV drones on than as drone bombers attack. More hearts are broken slowly, over time, as radios blare, and video games chirp, and traffic screams than in all the great noise of tsunamis and wars. Our noise, our constant, endless noise could very well destroy us.

You and I are tempted not to great acts of villainy, but to small acts of neglect, and despair, and apathy. Our biggest temptation is not to hurt others, but to stand idly by and allow discrimination to occur in our churches and in our clubs—and I don't mean racial discrimination, as evil as that is. Our biggest temptation is to stand by and hope that we and those we love will all be dead by the time our polluted lifestyles finally make the planet unlivable. Our greatest temptation is to go on as we always have, and hope that tougher laws will fix society's problems, whose roots are in deep, systemic injustice. We're tempted not to matter. But in the deep silence of our hearts we know very well what it is we are called to do and be!

Where will you find the strength to be the person you are meant to be? You, whose life is filled with so much noise! You'll find it in silence. In this season of Lent, give up coffee if you want to, or red meat. But a far better thing to give up would be unnecessary noise. Give up your radio. Give up social media. Give up nervous chatter. Spend time in silence. There is a kind of boldness, a kind of courage, there is a kind of action that can *only* be born of silence. There is a kind of wonder that will nourish our souls, and give us hope for tomorrow, but we can *only* find it if we will sit in silence for a time—perhaps a long time—and wait for it. That's one purpose of the wilderness. Amen.