

In the Wilderness

Luke 4:1-15

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Given where I start my sermon this morning, I believe it appropriate for us to acknowledge that we gather to worship on Treaty 4 land. It was originally home to the Cree, Ojibwa, and Assiniboine as well as being the traditional home land of the Metis. Today it hosts, supports and sustains peoples from many racists and countries. May we ever be committed to having it be the home of The Many living in whole and peaceful relationship with each other.

The Indigenous People of N. America used to have a practice where they would send young adults (usually young males) into the wilderness on a vision quest. The quest included 4 days and nights of fasting during which time, according to Wikipedia, “the young person prays and cries out to the spirits that they may have a vision, one that will help them find their purpose in life, their role in community, and how they may best serve the People.” Usually with the vision would come a symbol—an animal or force of nature—that could serve the person as a reminder of who they are and their purpose in life for this rest of his life.

I recall several years ago listening to a series of lectures by an aboriginal Anglican bishop from the American NE. He suggested that Jesus’ time in the wilderness was a vision quest like that of his people and that it was Jesus’ time to sort out his purpose in life, his calling by God, and what his ministry would be like. Luke describes Jesus’ time in the wilderness as 40 days—we’ll come back to that phrase in a bit—40 days of being tempted by the devil. Mark describes it as 40 days that were a combination of being tempted by Satan and being waited on by angels. For Jesus it was forty days of intense struggle as he had to decide whether he was going to buy into his era’s three primary stories for bringing about the good life—consumerism, peace at the point of the sword, magical religion—or if he was going to go with God’s way. The options

offered by his world certainly seemed more attractive, more efficient, and came with a lot less struggle, and, by all appearances, a lot less suffering than God's Way.

After Jesus had finally decided what to do, the Luke Good News Storyteller says: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."¹ His path had been set before him. He knew what he was about and he was not going to be dissuaded from it. His vision was clear and compelling. He was going to do what he had been chosen for and called to, come hell or high water.

This story, the story of Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness, became an important story for me in 2015 and on into 2016. In April, 2015 I underwent colon cancer surgery. In June of that year, I began chemotherapy treatments. The effects were immediate. However with pills to keep nausea at bay, I did okay as each 2-week cycle came with its bad days and its good days. I did notice that every two weeks I would go down then come back up, but not as far up as I had been before the treatment. I was zig-zagging my way down into the Abyss.

After my 10th treatment in mid-October, I tumbled over the edge. I stopped writing my blogs. I largely stopped communicating with people. If my daughters called I said little more than "Hi" and "I'm okay"—which I wasn't—and then offered they could talk to Mom. Sylvia and I talked the bare minimum—what to have for supper and, each morning, Sylvia talking me through whatever worry and guilt had attached me at 3:00 in the morning when I lay awake in the darkness. My oncologist decided I had received as many treatments as I could handle, emotionally and physically.

After the treatments stopped, I thought I would immediately begin to get better. I didn't. Chemo's damage to good cells is not so easily overcome. I began to think I would never get

¹ Luke 4:14–15. NRSV.

better. My low point was when I lay on a bed in the ER at the local hospital, down to 142 pounds, curled up in a fetal position, crying.

It was during this chemo and post-chemo time that the Spirit—yes, I believe God “whispers in our ears”—led me to this story in Luke 4. I came to the conclusion that what I was experiencing was my own wilderness, my own time with demons and angels, my own “forty days.” I experienced wonderful times of meditation, contemplation, and journaling in the mornings—every morning. I have never experienced God’s Presence as real nor as comforting as I did during that time. I experienced times when I wanted to curse the Demon Cancer and all its nasty gargoyles. There were times I was in the absolute darkness of despair. To help me during this time, I would often write “40 days” in my journal. I had it written on a little card I kept in my pocket; had it with me all day. That way I could periodically look at it and remind myself that 40 days is just that, 40 days. No, no one is marking days on a calendar. When the Bible says 40 days or 40 years it just means “a good long time.” It was my 40 days, my forty days to wrestle with demons, be comforted by angels, and be changed.

My faith changed. Prior to 2015 my Facebook page read: “Too much evidence to believe in God; too much evidence not to believe in God.” In 2016 much of the doubt had changed. Oh, I still have lots of questions. And there is less that I now believe *about* God than there ever has been. But I believe more *in* God than ever before, believe *in* God who is Presence, Love and Caring. I changed as a person. I am a different person, husband, father, friend, preacher, and community member now. I have a clearer vision of what my life is about and what I want my last 20 years to be about. All because of 40 days in the wilderness.

Jesus resisted the three history-shaping and character-forming stories. My faith strengthened and my character was transformed. However, there is no guarantee that this will

happen. Sometimes we have a choice whether or not we will enter the wilderness. Jesus did. I did not. Either way we have a choice as to what will happen to us in that wilderness.

I have not yet seen the movie, *Vice*, much as I have looked for it. I gather this coming week. However, I have done some reading about Dick Cheney's life and about the story that *Vice* tells: Dick Cheney's ascendancy to power.

Dick Cheney had several opportunities to enter "40 days in the wilderness" and come out a different man. In 1963 he had to leave Yale University because of alcohol issues. In 1977, with Gerald Ford's loss of the election, he lost his job as chief of staff and had to decide what he would do with his life now. In 1978 he suffered his first heart attack. Another chance for "40 days in the wilderness." And still he continued his drive for power that ultimately made him the most powerful Vice-President in US history.

Yet at what cost, personally and to our world? The drive for power and his use of power left him with a family in relationship shambles when he supported one daughter's strong stand against same-sex marriage to help her win an election even as his other daughter was a lesbian. It left the second daughter angry and alienated. He is known as the VP who signed off on "enhanced interrogation techniques" employed by the USA after 9/11. The movie faults Cheney for thousands of deaths and for the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq, making our world a much less secure place. All because he did not welcome and embrace the miracle-working power of "40 Days in the Wilderness."

Jesus considered the Dick Cheney option. Jesus saw it at work in Pax Romana, peace in the world with the use of swords, war chariots, and crucifixions. He rejected it, but that rejection was not automatic. Jesus had to make a deliberate choice, there in the Palestinian wilderness, to head a different direction. He also had to consciously and deliberately reject money and

consumerism as well as the Fairy Godmother magic of the health and wealth gospel. They both seemed awfully attractive. All three of Jesus' choices are still on offer today, as attractive and ultimately death-dealing as ever.

I could have responded differently during my "40 days in the wilderness." I could have insisted, in a kind of "health and wealth" mindset, that God had to heal me. After all the Bible says God will. I never did ask for that, though, I will admit near the end of November when it seemed I would never get better, I did use the words of the Ancient Poet to do a bit of bargaining: "After all, God, after all the good you have done in me, are you going to waste it by having me die?" With the Ancient Poet I prayed:

"Can you sell me for a profit when I'm dead?
auction me off at a cemetery yard sale?
When I'm 'dust to dust' my songs
and stories of you won't sell.
So listen! and be kind!
Help me out of this!"²

I could have become bitter. In early January, 2016 I almost did. I had stopped meditation and journaling. I realized only if I started again could I stop the slide downward into a spiritual Abyss. Am I ever glad I made the choices I did.

In his book, *Water to Wine*, Brian Zahnd tells what he calls "some of [his] story."³ Brian came to Christian faith during the Jesus Movement of the 70s. In the 80s, when he was in his early twenties, he founded Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri, and grew it into one of America's mega-churches. In the 90s it was dubbed one of the twenty fastest growing churches in the US.

² Psalm 30:8-10. *The Message*. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

³ Brian Zahnd, *Water to Wine: Some of My Story* (St. Joseph, MI: Spello, 2016).

And then, in his mid-forties, he hit a major crisis. In his own words: “What I knew was that the Jesus I believed in warranted a better Christianity than what I was familiar with. I was in Cana and the wine had run out. I needed Jesus to perform a miracle.”⁴ That recognition that he was in desperate need of something in his life started Brian Zahnd’s “40 days in the wilderness.” For him it was a 22-day fast, spent reading and praying. He came out the other end, a changed man with a changed faith, a changed message, and a changed ministry. About all that remained the same for him is what I would say about my faith and spirituality: “Centered on Jesus and Informed by the Bible.” However, both of those meant something very different things than they had meant in his previous meg-church, Evangelical mindset; something very different than most of Evangelical Christianity mean by them. Forty days in the wilderness at 45 and you wouldn’t believe the change.

Entering our own “40 days in the wilderness” can happen at any age. As a young adult like the Indigenous of N. American. At 30 as a way of figuring out our mission in life like it did for Jesus. At 45 as it did for Brian Zahnd in a mid-life crisis. At 64 as it did for me, pushed into the wilderness without any choice in the matter. There are no age criteria, and for some of us it may happen several times in the course of one lifetime.

It can be by deliberate choice at some point in life, early or later. It can be when we hit a crisis as it did for Brian Zahnd. It can be when our bodies rebel and let us down like it did for me—cancer, heart attack, or a variety of other things that hit. It can be the result of a losing battle with alcohol, a lost job, or a heart attack as it did for Dick Cheney. However, whether we go into the wilderness by choice or get dumped there by life’s vagaries, that wilderness is an opportunity, an opportunity not to be missed, for its 40 days can result in a transformation you will not regret.

⁴ Zahnd, back cover.

Entering the wilderness is not just for pastors like Zahnd and myself, politicians like Cheney or evangelists and political activists like Jesus. This is where Indigenous people definitely got it right. It is for everyone—mechanic and teacher, accountant and homemaker, clerk and lawyer, doctor and farmer. Retired, in the middle of a career, or starting out. The important thing, again, is it is not to be missed.

Life, what Jesus called Abundant Life, awaits each of us on the other side of the wilderness. The wilderness will not be easy, don't kid yourself but it will be worth every struggle, in the end. The temptations will always be there to buy into history's famous three stories—consumerism, power, and magic religion. However, Jesus invites us to reject those and buy into God's dream for us. That seems only possible if we do the "40 days in the wilderness" first. So, find your wilderness, discover what God is dreaming for you, and be ready for the Life and Adventure of your Life.