

*The season of Lent brings our minds to the wilderness Jesus found himself in after his baptism.
The wilderness-temptation encounter is common to the lives of people seen as holy.
Lent is an opportunity to clarify our needs and dependencies and call attention
to the deeper realities of being human.*

Wilderness testing was common to holy people –
the people who have been seen as more than human –
seen as – well – almost God.

We just read about Jesus' wilderness experience.
Another story of Jesus and another wilderness and testing experience
appears in the Islamic scriptures.

A similar story is told about the Buddha and Mara – the evil one.

But there has got to be something of this that rings true for you and me today.

That is what we want to talk about.



It is the season of Lent.

In the very early years of Christianity there was no such thing as Lent.

There is some evidence that early Christians
fasted 40 hours between Good Friday and Easter.
But - spending 40 days in prayer and self-denial didn't come until later.

Lent did not appear - until the newness - said Barbara Brown Taylor -
had worn off of this new religion called Christianity.

Christians had become kind of humdrum in their faith.

We can identify with that.

Generally speaking – Christians had become comfortable
and didn't see what might be troublesome about it.

Perhaps you could not distinguish them from anyone else.

They no longer seemed different.
The kind of love Jesus taught them was wearing off.

They blended in.
They avoided extremes.
They no longer got arrested for defending the poor.
They decided to be nice instead of holy. ¹

Someone must have suggested
that it was time to call Christians back to their roots.

And they went to the Bible to get some clues to how to do that.
And they found it:

Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust.
Elijah spent 40 days in the wilderness before hearing the still small voice.
And Moses spent 40 days listening for God to give the law.
Luke gave us the story of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness.

So something called Lent became a season of the church.
The name comes from an old English word meaning "spring."
Like a springtime for the soul.

We might think of it as 40 days to cleanse our system and open our eyes.
Get clear about our needs
and what we are like when all comforts are gone.

We might think of it as 40 days to live by the grace of God alone -
not by what we can supply for ourselves.

Some of you may have been on an Outward Bound experience.
Call this an "Outward Bound" for the soul.

Because an outward bound experience
is really an inward bound contemplative journey.

You place yourself in the hands of strangers
who ask you to do foolhardy things -
like walk backwards over a precipice
with nothing but a rope around your waist -
or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes.

But the real test comes when you go solo
and we are wished the best of luck for the next 24 hours.
Then comes to time to get to know ourselves.
And find out what we really miss - and what we're really afraid of.

Whether it is our favorite food or a safe room with a door to lock –
or a pillow for our head – we will miss something - a lot.
What would it be for you?

Barbara Brown Taylor talks about our pacifiers -
because in experiences like that we discover what our pacifiers are -
the habits – the substances – the surroundings we need to comfort ourselves.
Sometimes they block out our pain and our fear.

Most of us are addicted to something -
whether it is eating – drinking – shopping – computer games -
blaming – or taking care of other people.

When those things are removed it's like being exposed -
or being in a world without anesthesia.
No comfort but – the very deepest comfort - God.

An addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside us -
the space that really belongs to the Divine – the source - God.

So the wilderness times are when we make a point to slow down – set aside all the pacifiers -
and encounter the divine energy within – call it what you will
- the essence of the creative God within us.

When we start out – we can feel hollow.
That is not a sign of something being wrong.
That is a sign of clearing out some space for what is real and enduring.

If we are running all the time – we don't find it and can't let it help us grow.
That is what this story in Luke is about.

There were three temptations in the story:

The first temptation is to think we will starve –
especially if our pacifier is food or drink – something we consume.

If that does not get us – if we don't leave the wilderness for that -
the voice in our head will go to the next level.

We will start thinking of power –
how we might use power to get whatever we think we need.

And if we don't fall for that one –
we can say to ourselves - if God really loves me –

I can do whatever I want.

Some of you may have heard the famous golfer talk about that yesterday.

"I thought I was entitled to do whatever I wanted to do -
regardless of the consequences.



I said at the beginning that there must be something that rings true for us.

That is something for each of us to decide.

But, it is a story that helps us understand ourselves
and it is worth our while – if we want to live deeply and fully -

not only to be the followers of Jesus we want to be –
but to be fully realized human beings.
We have so many things around here that can enrich our lives.
But if we don't do the interior work -
we won't enjoy the rest very much.



So remember - the early church – not the earliest church –
but the later early church - crafted Lent.
Because when the church became ordinary – it lost its power -
to really be a force for change.
It quit living in the spirit of Jesus.

So we have Lent -
and Lent invites us to go deeper.
This is why it rings true to something we need in our lives – right now.

Lent is a time that we can pay closer attention –
to what goes on inside us – as we navigate life and its challenges -
and grow from them.

Lent can be a time to give up something
if it will help us be aware of things we depend on too much.

Or – Lent can be a time to pay closer attention to life – to our own inner voices
and how they can lead us astray.

Lent is a time to find the divine within us -
because our lives can be so noisy – so full of things -
that we lose our grounding.

Lent is a way to find it – find ourselves.
Lent is well worth the time. I invite you into it.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Settling for Less"