

Our 40 days of Lent begin and end in a wilderness, from the dialogue with the devil to the final bewilderment of betrayal at the last supper, fear in the garden, and loneliness on the cross. To be in the wilderness, the wild, is where one can become isolated, lost and die. Wild is the root of the word wilderness & bewildered - the physical and emotional state of being lost.

Most of us spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of the wilderness, but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that forever. Our ancestors decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about Lent as a time of spring housecleaning for our souls, discovering what our "pacifiers" are: "the habits, substances, or surroundings we use to comfort ourselves, to block out the pain and fear that are normal parts of being human. It is necessary to find out what life is like with no comfort but God."

At some point everyone goes to the wilderness to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about. I am convinced that most of us have the potential of being addicted to something. Almost everyone uses *something* – some kind of distraction in life, whether it is eating, shopping, murder mysteries, Facebook, reruns of your favorite TV show, Pottery Barn catalogs, spider solitaire, blaming or taking care of other people. I'm not saying those are awful things. I'm just saying they are distractions--things to reach for when we are too tired, too sad, or too afraid to enter the wilderness of the present moment. And then there are those things that really do get us into trouble – true temptations and addictions like– alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, & anger.

The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. We are challenged in the wilderness to name our particular addictions, the things we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. To enter the wilderness is to leave our distractions behind. We have all of Lent to practice. The problem for most of us is that we cannot go straight from giving up our personal distraction to hearing the still, small voice of God in the wilderness. If it worked like that, churches would be full. What we have instead are 40 days for finding out what life is like if we are willing to enter the wilderness with Jesus, without the usual distractions or pacifier or anesthesia.

Simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving whatever it is you think will fill the gap? After a while it may feel as if God has gone AWOL and we begin to feel our own spiritual insufficiency to deal with life. Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. "You'll starve. You'll go nuts. You won't be you anymore." That's when temptation comes.

And yet there is some good news in this. Because even if no one ever wants to go there, and even if those of us who end up there want out again as soon as possible, the wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to Jesus? It *freed* him--from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose, from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life. After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus learned to trust the Spirit that led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of

clarity he would not have found anywhere else. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus needs the kind of clarity and grit that is found only in the wilderness.

The song we sang just a moment ago - "On Eagle's Wings" – from Psalm 91 has become a favorite, and I use it frequently when I visit people in the hospital and at Memorial Services. Borrowing images from the psalms and the book of Isaiah, the song's lyrics deliver a message of hope and comfort, protection and deliverance. It is a comforting image. After all, who can object to an eagle-God, a God whose loving care sweeps us off our feet and rescues us from danger?

Those who study these majestic birds tell us that their journey from young to old is actually a bumpy ride. Young eaglets begin in the safety of their mother's nest. For a time, their lives are narrowly confined. In the nest, they are protected up high from the dangers below. Food and shelter are all provided for them. They live in their own kind of Eden. But their mother knows better. In time, she starts urging her young out of the nest. She begins by plucking off the soft bedding of the nest and exposing them to the thorns and thistles underneath. If her young fail to take the hint, she starts removing the twigs—one by one—leaving larger and larger gaps in the nest. Eventually, the floor drops out from under them, and the eaglet finds itself plunging toward earth. As they fall, the mother swoops down to catch her young, but only to carry the eaglet even higher, and allows it to fall again to the earth. The process of falling and being lifted up is repeated. Eventually, her young are able to spread their own wings and soar on their own.

God, too, like a Mother Eagle, not only allows Jesus to fall into the wilderness, the Spirit leads him there. God allows Jesus to face the temptations and dangers below. Three times Jesus faces the devil. Three times he is lifted up by God, until he finds his own wings.

Doesn't the same hold true for us? The Lenten season is the time in which God nudges us further out of our nest, our comfort zone. Sure enough, we often profess our love of God. We tell God of our desire to follow Jesus. But we still find ourselves resisting God's nudges. If God has a preferential option for the poor, we have a preferential option for the status quo. We'd rather cling to our own nests than the risk of falling and discovering a greater closeness to the love of God. We'd rather put a damper on the power of God's spirit than find out how powerfully that spirit can work in our lives. "Lent," it is called, from an English word meaning "spring"-- the greening of the human soul--pruned with repentance, fertilized with fasting, self-examination, mulched with prayer. Lent is not about punishing ourselves for being human, and it isn't necessarily about giving up chocolate. Maybe some time in the wilderness is worth it. A few weeks of choosing to live on less, not more, not because your regular life is bad or sinful, but because you want to make sure it is your *real* life, the one you long to be living, which can be hard to do when you're living on distractions and busyness.

The best spiritual practices do not separate us from the world, but only separate us from our habits and assumptions that cause us to limit or doubt the divine presence with us. We dwell in a wilderness, but we are not alone. The desert is not God-forsaken nor does it belong to the devil. It is God's home. The Holy Spirit is there, within us and beside us. And if we cannot feel that spirit inside of us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far away, with enough in him to sustain us, enough to make us brave. Finding God in the wilderness is finding God precisely everywhere we are afraid or lost.