

“WHERE FAITH IS FORMED”

Psalm 91:1-2,9-12,14-16; Luke 4:1-13

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A three-year old heard the story of Jesus in the wilderness in children’s worship, and afterward he told his mother all about it. And he considered what this notion of temptation meant in his own life. “If we were at a store,” he said, “and you and dad were in one aisle and I was in another, and there was candy... the devil would say, ‘you should take some.’” His mom wanted to know more about this: “What would you do if the devil said ‘take the candy?’” she asked. He replied, “I’d say ‘thank you!’”

We laugh but there’s a lotta truth there. Aren’t we all sometimes only too ready to accept the invitation to just help ourselves to what we want, buy into something that looks good, go along with a comfortable illusion, accept at face value something that should probably be questioned? It’s so much easier than asking questions, or thinking about the ethics or the consequences, or examining our own motivations.

I guess that’s human nature. But I suspect it also might have something to do with the fact that we’re often not very good at taking ourselves seriously as people on a spiritual journey. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we don’t always take the more serious aspects of that journey, well, ... *seriously* enough. And the church, by and large, hasn’t done enough to equip people for the parts of the journey of faith where the road gets rocky.

When people come to church, they might be looking for a lovely sanctuary that feels like a sacred space, or good nursery care for their little ones, or a warm, welcoming atmosphere. They might be expecting inspirational preaching or fabulous music. They might be wanting prayers that comfort or some words of hope to take with them, maybe even an encouraging scriptural quote to post on the mirror. They might be hoping for opportunities to learn more about the Bible or form relationships in which they can get support and talk about life and faith. Some might be looking for a harmonious fellowship and an ethos of integrity and kindness. Some people want to be part of a vibrant faith community that connects with the world in lots of ways and has innovative outreach and creative programs to serve those in need... a church that makes an impact on the larger community and in the world.

Maybe some of that describes you, today or at some point in your life. After all, we have come to church for something. And all of those things feel like things that can build our faith, meet our spiritual needs, help and support us in our journey, and enable the passing on of faith to those who are younger.

And you know what? As a church, we want those things. We want to offer people those things. As a pastor, I want us to be able to offer them.

But I just recently re-read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*, and it's given me pause in my Lent reflections on the nature of the journey of faith. Bonhoeffer wrote that book as a pastor and leader of a seminary where young men – they were all men in that time and place – were developing in the Christian faith and preparing to be pastors, while living together in community. But they didn't have very many of those things we tend to be seeking as supports for the journey of faith. They were part of the Confessing Church – believers who had rejected the German Lutheran Church's incorporation of Nazi ideology.

Their community was small and illegal and endangered. They didn't have pipe organs or worship bands, or great facilities, or outreach programs. I would guess they probably did hear some great preaching, but there could not have been any words to explain the evil going on around them, or take away the horror. These Christians had little reason to be optimistic about their ability to impact their society or to help those suffering around them. They learned about the Bible but it didn't lead them to any illusion of safety or keep them from having to face many difficult choices and losses. Nevertheless, *Life Together* is all about the faith of a community and of individuals being shaped and strengthened in the context of crisis.

That's pretty different from what we expect our journey of faith to look like.

We are often not well equipped to meet temptation because we don't expect it, suffering because we deny it, adversity because we expect to be exempt. We are often not well-equipped to deal with challenges to our faith or our sense of God's call or our belief in God's goodness, because we expect to proceed calmly along without them. We are often not well-equipped to get out of the church and live our faith in the world because we have made a place where it's easy to be faithful, and we can get comfortable in here.

Bonhoeffer and his companions were in the wilderness – very far from anything we might think of as “normal” life, without so much of the support for our faith that we take for granted. They had no way of knowing what the next day might bring. There was no “church business as usual.” There must have been a constant temptation to give up. In this wilderness, the spiritual journey had to be taken seriously if it was going to be taken at all. But the wilderness turned out to be, after all, a place where faith - real, deep faith - was formed.

Well, that is very biblical, isn't it?

The people of Israel spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, and it was tough. They faced obstacles and enemies and deprivation and uncertainty. But that's where they heard God speak, received the law, struggled with fears and doubts and temptation, learned to rely on God and to know themselves as God's people.

Jesus goes into the wilderness, too – according to Luke, God's Spirit leads him there.

Remember that we are talking here about wilderness in the biblical sense. We aren't meant to picture pristine nature - peaceful lakes, birdsong, beautiful vistas and the like. Think desolate, dry, dangerous. The terrain is rough and there are no paths and there

are things out there that can hurt you. And all help and support and comfort has been left behind. "Wilderness" in the Bible refers to both physical and spiritual realities. It's a place full of unknowns. It's a place where hard realities can't be ignored. It's a place where you can't hide who you are and you can't hide from God.

Jesus didn't go out there on purpose looking for temptation. But Jesus can't be who he is, do what he came to do, without walking through the hard realities and facing the demons that lurk in the kind of wilderness that all human beings will walk through some time or other, and some human beings live with for a long time. He accepts that his life can't be lived in denial of the relentlessly seductive call of evil disguised as good.

Now, this wilderness time wasn't all there was to Jesus' life. We know that he taught and ministered to people and worshipped God, that he had friends he loved, that he enjoyed meals with them and told stories, that his life had purpose and meaning, that he brought the very presence of God into the lives of those who followed him. But it's important, I think, to have this story here near the beginning of Jesus' story. It tells us right up front about the humanness he shares with us, and acknowledges that the human journey – the spiritual journey - though it has many joys, has its darker times too, and that the struggles are real and must be engaged.

This is not, of course, our idealized vision of what the life of faith is all about.

We count on feeling close to God when singing a song of praise or seeing a rainbow and giving thanks... but we are surprised sometimes to find God palpably present when we are washing the dishes or feeling angry. Equally, we may expect to feel God's presence whenever we call... and not know what to do when God feels far away, as sometimes happens.

We expect our faith to be a talisman we can hold on to through anything... but we discover that it can be hard to hold on to when the journey gets rough. It can also make us see truths we'd rather avoid, push us to do things we don't want to do, challenge us with thorny questions ... and sometimes it does not provide all the answers. We want to believe our journey will take us from strength to strength, but in fact there are temptations and stumbles along the way.

We think at first that our faith will be shaped by Bible study or Sunday school lessons or sermons, but it turns out that our faith is just as often shaped in hospital rooms, and in conflicts where we have to make hard decisions, and in sacrifices we'd rather not make, and in struggle with sins and doubts, and in middle-of-the-night despair.

You might not like the sound of this. I admit I'm not wild about it either. But – though I don't believe we are meant to go *looking* for temptation or suffering – it is a fact that faith IS often shaped and inspired and made resilient through hardship.

We expect to get to know Jesus as he walks with us in a garden ... but instead sometimes we find that where he meets us is in the wilderness. But from this story, we know that he knows about the wilderness.

In the wilderness, Jesus is faced with the temptation to make bread out of stones. Not only is he hungry, he knows other people are hungry; and of course, if he could make bread to satisfy their physical hunger, he could make other things, to satisfy other hungers... but he knows the hunger of the human heart will never be satisfied like that.

He's faced with the temptation of power, the kind of power over others that can only be had by selling your soul and worshipping something that is not God ... but he knows who is really God.

He's faced with the temptation to test the limits of God's love with a foolish and unnecessary risk, just to see... but he knows that this is not what it means to trust God.

Jesus' way in the wilderness was intentional and receptive. In other words, he understood his call and he was attentive to God's voice. And so he turned, at each challenge, toward God's grace and God's will.

As we follow him, on his journey, we learn from him what choosing God's way looks like, and how it leads, ultimately, to the good: Though he refused to turn stones into bread, Jesus does feed the hungry. Though he refused political power, he proclaimed the kingdom of God's justice and peace. Though he refused to jump off the temple to see if God's angels would catch him, he did go to the cross trusting in the ultimate mercy and life-giving power of God. (Ringe, p. 49)

There's a reason this story is often read on the first Sunday in Lent. Jesus' journey in the wilderness is a great introduction to the season. You know that sometimes in Lent Christians give up something or commit to a new spiritual practice or get involved in doing some special service. But you can also think about the observance of Lent not as sacrificing or doing, but as an opportunity to be intentional about your life as a spiritual journey and to become receptive to God's grace.

Wilderness times will still be wilderness times. But they will be faith-forming, soul-strengthening, heart-opening times. Clarity will come, and the wisdom and strength to turn away from what is false to what is real, wherever the journey of faith takes us. And we'll know that Jesus has walked this road before us.

Amen.

Resources:

Articles by Lori Brandt Hale, Jeffrey L Tribble, Sr. and Sharon H. Ringe in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol.2*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.