

The landscape was well-suited for struggle. To the northwest of the Dead Sea, beyond the oasis of old Jericho, lies the Judean wilderness. From the Jordan River Valley, 1000 feet below sea level, the topography rises unevenly through low foothills to reach small mountains at 3000 feet above sea level. This area is too harsh to be called beautiful. The dirt -brown to reddish brown is spotted liberally with volcanic basalt rocks, black and sharp edged. The scrub grass is too poor to support grazing. The rainfall is too infrequent to grow wheat. It is a lonely place to be for forty days.

The mountains which dominate the western horizon don't stop all the storms from crossing over into the wilderness. Over thousands of years, the hard, rocky mountain slopes have been carved by these torrential rains, and deep mountain pools and basins formed, sufficiently large and protected to remain fresh and cool in the scorching summer heat. These reservoirs were well known. To survive in the wilderness, Jesus had to know their locations.

But why would Jesus venture out into this inhospitable, even dangerous place? Mark writes in his Gospel that "The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness", as if Jesus was the ancient scapegoat of Israel driven into the wilderness with the sins of the people tied around its neck.(Lev 16 22) - *The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he (Aaron) shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.*). Matthew writes, "*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*", in a manner similar to Job whom God allowed to be tempted by Satan. Luke writes in a way to bring together Mark and Matthew, "*Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit for 40 days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil.*" It is as if the wilderness offers the best setting for communion with the Holy Spirit. In the wilderness, life is stripped of everything that detracts from a relationship with God. It is a crucible of loyalty to God, where Jesus will be purified like molten gold.

Here is the scene: One man, alone, in a landscape that offers little except water in certain places. It was the 40th day, for he kept a record by scratching each day upon the face of a rock. Holding that rock in his hand, his body depleted from such extreme hunger, he heard the voice of the devil say, "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.*" The words echoed off the canyon walls where he sat, sounding like the cries of hungry people everywhere. "*Feed us, we are starving. Give us bread. Give us manna in the wilderness. Feed us! Feed us!*" He heard their cries and felt their hunger, but he would not trade his trust in God for bread, when so many, so many needed him to be their Bread of Life.

As he bent over to set down the scratched rock, he caught a glimpse of his own body. Emaciated, abused by weather, with countless small cuts and bruises, he looked terrible and smelled worse. As he raised his eyes, it was as if he was high above the earth in one dizzying flash. A vision of grandeur and luxury surrounded him as he heard that voice again: "*I will give you all this glory and acclaim of all the mighty kingdoms of the world!*" He felt the yearning for such comfort; the same yearnings you and I have; the luxury to be comfortable, pampered,

indulged. But he set his heart upon the comfort of doing the will of God, and to live as a destitute beggar if that was what was needed by God.

What is this? Now he is perched on the ledge that surrounds the temple in Jerusalem, the temple that holds the Holy of Holies, where worship is real. He would surely die if he fell, but he isn't afraid of falling. There is that voice again: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and fall into the loving embrace of God your Father." To claim what was truly his to claim, his divine birthright, this was the severest temptation. He could tumble through the air to rest firmly in the strong arms of the angels. He could live without pain, without suffering, - he need not die. (Jesus you are dust and to dust you will return - he would never hear that spoken.) No, he would not assert his will and abuse his status as God's Messiah. He spoke Scripture - It is said, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." (Deut 6: 16) He gave voice to those words from Deuteronomy, and they echoed off the sun bronzed sky, coming back to him, and he heard: "Father, if you are willing remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." (Lk 22:42). He would live by the will of the Holy One who sent him.

When the Lenten Season began on Ash Wednesday, we walked into the wilderness with Jesus. Admittedly, we are individually at different places in our faith journey. Taken seriously, Lent is difficult wherever you are in your walk with the Lord; a difficult but satisfying time. Our comfortable habits, taking for granted the necessities of the day, our need for companionship . . . The desires of our hearts, the grudges we harbor within, the attempts to dominate the lives of others - these are fundamental aspects of the human psyche. Who are we when we voluntarily give up those things? The darker side of our personalities need the desert light of his humility. When we see ourselves in his light, truly see who we are in his light, we can be changed - converted - more and more into his likeness. We can be changed in an instant, but to become holy is a process, a day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute by minute process that asks us to become more aware of God. When we practice self-denial, however small it may be, we willingly suffer a little crucifixion. How vital these little crucifixions can be in our spiritual growth is impossible for us to measure. But God knows. God gives the growth of spirit. God strengthens us in temptation with God's Word. God forgives the repentant sinner.

People say that life is a journey. We should be intentional about it. Time alone with God will clarify your understanding of your "self". You will see yourself more clearly. Such self knowledge may make us uncomfortable, sad, frightened, angry. Oh yes, to be with God in the wilderness can be a humbling experience. But it was a step, one of many steps, Jesus took on his way to Jerusalem. It is important for us to be thoughtful, and honest, and humbled by the simplest act of self-denial, if we want to find ourselves in the Garden of Gethsemane, before an empty tomb with the stone rolled away, and proclaim Christ is Risen! We are not Christ, but we are to be Christ-like. We are invited to enter the wilderness of a Lenten discipline.

Amen.