

Wilderness

I remember distinctly the day I quit camping. I was never an avid camper – no one is going to confuse me with someone who has hiked the Appalachian Trail – but when I was in college, I camped enough to get a clear sense of what the experience was like.

One time, my brother and I and two of our friends had traveled to the Outer Banks of North Carolina to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore – this was before they moved the lighthouse, so you could climb to the top and look down and it was as if the surf was right at your feet.

It all started off so well. But then my brother and one friend set up one tent and threw their things into it - which left me to share the tent with another friend, a likeable enough know-it-all who had the unique ability to talk without breathing.

It was a star-crossed trip from that moment. My tent-mate and I couldn't agree about anything – but the chief disagreement was whether any sort of water barrier should be placed beneath our tent. He declared it water-tight, and I declared it not so. It was his tent, so he won the argument.

That night a tropical storm swept over Hatteras Island. Buckets of water dumped from the sky onto Cape Hatteras. Gallons of water welled up through the floor of our tent because, mind you, there was no water barrier other than the fabric of the tent. My tent-mate decided he would channel MacGyver and in a smooth move that would make your average boy-scout or girl-scout recoil in horror, whipped out his trusty knife that he'd just been waiting to use and cut a hole in the bottom of the tent "for drainage."

Now, I'm not an engineer, but I do know that for drainage to work, there has to be less water in the place where the water is supposed to go than there is water in the place from which it is coming. I do get that there are some exceptions to this rule, but generally it's a true statement.

The tent, which had previously only had a puddle in the floor, soon had two inches of water standing.

I did not look upon my tent-mate with the love of Jesus in that moment.

The next morning as my brother and his tent-mate began dissembling their relatively dry tent and ours was hanging from a tree draining, along with our sleeping bags, clothing and packs, I looked my brother dead in the eye and said, "It's time to check into a hotel."

And in a moment of keen insight, my brother, the avid camper, looked back at me and all of the drenched paraphernalia and said, "Yes, I think that's a good idea."

I understand that there are people who go out into the wilderness on purpose. I am not one of them.

And yet I know even more that the wilderness as we see it in the Bible isn't a camper's idyll, or even roughing it a little bit, but something much, much darker.

The wilderness as we see it in the Bible is a scary place.

Think for just a moment on the language we encounter here in this text. Forty days and forty nights – where have we heard this before?

The flood raged for forty days and forty nights.

Moses, waiting for the Law from God, fasted for forty days and forty nights.

Elijah, fleeing from ruin, fled for forty days to the mountain of God.

The Israelites of course wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

It means a long time. It means *slow down; something significant is happening.*

It means a time of trial.

When Jesus goes out in to the wilderness he is fresh from his baptism; he is still dripping the water of the Jordan.

The wilderness is not a hospitable place. The wilderness is a dried-up place – parched of all moisture, but dried up in other ways – dried up of possibilities, dried up of friendship, dried up of hope.

In the wilderness, bad things happen.

Temptations happen in the wilderness.

Dripping wet from the Jordan, Jesus walked out into the wilderness.

And just like that the stakes are raised.

What is at stake is whether or not Jesus can be who he is called to be – whether he *can* be who he is called to be.

When Jesus was called out into the wilderness he was called into the very human struggle with temptation.

The struggle with temptation was more than skin-deep – it went all the way to his very *self*.

We considered last Sunday at length about what the humanity of Jesus tells us about our own humanity, but I wonder, are we really comfortable with the humanity of Jesus?

Ever since the council of Chalcedon in the fifth century we have affirmed that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, but I wonder sometimes, are we a bit more comfortable with Jesus when he's fully divine – because he's different from us?

When we're thinking of the divine Jesus, he is full of power – the power of God, no less. He heals the unclean, he binds up broken-hearted people, he restores sight to the blind, he makes the crippled to get up and walk – there's a lot to be said for following this Jesus, right? This Jesus does things we can't do.

I mean, who in their right mind, if they encountered the power to heal on this scale, to perform miracles and signs, wouldn't be moved?

We certainly want Jesus to have divine power and be able to change things, don't we?

But there is a long history of the church being unable to cope with Jesus being fully *human*. There was group called the *docetists* in the early church who simply couldn't wrap their minds around the idea of a human Jesus. Something about it just couldn't work. Jesus couldn't be human – God couldn't take on human form. There was something unseemly to them about the idea that Jesus should truly suffer, or truly be tempted, or truly feel pain and agony on the cross. It was ungodlike.

So, they proposed a simple solution: Jesus only *looked* human. He was really divine all along, so when we encounter stories rife with the vulnerability of Jesus, when he is tempted, hungry, weeping, crying – it's all just part of the story. He's really divine.

But there is a problem with this line of thinking: If Jesus isn't really human, then God didn't really come among us, not as one of us. God didn't take our part – God just *looked* like something was really happening.

And if it just looked like something was happening, what does it matter?

If God didn't really suffer with us, become one of us, does any of it all matter?

The early church looked at this prospect and saw the problems inherent in it and said, "no."

No... when Jesus went to the cross, it was as a human being. When Jesus went out into the wilderness, it was as a human being.

And when we consider that Jesus went into the wilderness as a human being, just like you and me, with all our frailties, it makes what happened there all the more amazing.

Dripping from his baptism, Jesus faced a test as to whether those promises would hold.

Isn't that always the ultimate test of faith, whether or not the promises hold? Isn't the measure of faith whether or not it helps us to get through the trials that come before us?

We do face trials to be sure.

I don't mean to be dark just because it's Lent, but if we're honest, we do face trials, don't we? I am struck – painfully so – by the simple reality of just how many members of First Presbyterian Church are living with disease at this very moment. That's a trial, isn't it? It's tough sometimes to keep faith while enduring treatments and prognoses and uncertain futures.

I am struck – indeed, painfully so – by just how many members of First Presbyterian Church are experiencing unemployment or underemployment. That's a trial, isn't it, to keep on going when there is a very real fear, not just of the bills, but whether we will be seen as valued and useful, about whether or not we will do meaningful work again?

Persons of faith are as apt to be swept into marital discord as anyone. Persons of faith are as likely to face parenting challenges as anyone. Life comes at us just as intensely as anyone.

And I am struck by how often death comes again and again to all whom we know and love and even to ourselves. Indeed John Donne put it best, "death comes to us all equally and makes us all equal in its coming."

No, I don't go camping anymore, but I do know where to find the wilderness.

The wilderness is that dried-up place where hope seems in short supply, where succor is hard to find and everywhere one turns one encounters nothing more than *hardness*.

Jesus went out in to the wilderness.

The Bible is pretty specific what is covered in Jesus' temptations while he's out in the wilderness though it varies from account to account. But I'm not so sure that the particulars are what's most important – though I suppose anyone can say that about trials from afar. When you're the one living through it, the particulars are right important.

The Gospel says that Jesus faced trials – big ones – real ones – testing whether he could or would be himself or whether he would succumb to a lesser impulse, to cheapen grace by taking the path of least resistance, of the least suffering. The temptation was to be less than God called him to be. Isn't that so much of what temptation is, truly?

The calling to be fully human is the calling to be exactly what God has created us and made us to be – to be God's good creations with good purpose, placed in good world to do good works... or not.

Jesus faced the temptation to take an easier route, perhaps a more expedient route, because being the human beings that God created us to be requires an extraordinary amount of trust in God.

Which of course, is all God ever wanted from us – to trust, to live knowing that God holds us and loves and so the need to grasp at alternative means to stave off our fears and insecurities is rendered unnecessary.

That is the temptation: to be less than we are created to be.

Through three rounds Jesus weathered the storm, each time by relying on God's promises.

And that's all we're called to do: To rely on God's promises, knowing what God has already done for us.

Have you read Ken Follett's book, Fall of Giants?

It begins in the coal mining towns of south Wales. We encounter a boy named Billy who is a son of a Union Organizer on his 14th birthday. It is to be his first day into the mines. After the winch lowers the cable bucket of miners into the shaft for his first time, his foreman, hating his father, sets him to the task of shoveling a pile of coal slag into a cart to be hauled up the track and out of the shaft.

The coal miners had a rite of initiation of leaving the first-timers to do some menial work on their first day with a lantern without enough fuel so that it would gutter out, leaving the boys in the pitch dark of the mine-shaft – usually just for a few moments, to teach them of the dangers of the mine and the importance of maintaining their lamps.

But the mine foreman is a cruel man and he hates Billy's father for his union sympathies and he leaves him in the dark for the full shift. When he returns, he expects to find a terrified boy huddled in the dark and instead he found Billy singing the hymns of his church upbringing and shoveling away.

"But weren't you afraid, all by yourself?" his friends ask.

"No," he replied, "I wasn't alone. Jesus was with me," he answers, naively perhaps.

But isn't that the heart of the Gospel: Because Jesus went into the wilderness and faced the trials, so can we. There is nowhere we may go where God has not gone before us... not even unto death.

That is the Good News of the Gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.