

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.

A wilderness. What do you think of when you hear that word? Perhaps you see the traditional desert, a vast stretch of dry and barren land. Depending on where you grew up, the wilderness might be inhospitable mountains or endless forests. Or maybe the wilderness is a city, a jungle of dirt and concrete and congestion. I've even known people who thought of American suburbia as a wilderness, a desolation of winding neighborhoods and all too similar strip malls.

For me, a wilderness might take the form of an Army base, a desert of dreary, manicured lawns and squat, ugly government buildings.

Whatever your take on "wilderness" says a lot about you. And though our imagery may change, a wilderness evokes desolation and solitude, both physical and spiritual. Any place in the world can be a wilderness, especially when we feel alone and cut off from our comforts and certainties.

There are times in our lives when the whole world feels like a wilderness. There's a numbness to that feeling, a sense of uncertainty and aloneness that no creature comforts can satisfy. In times like that, it's hard even to lay our troubles and anxieties before God.

Our Gospel today on the first Sunday of Lent finds Jesus venturing out into his own wilderness. There is the privation of fasting, of course—forty days without food!—but also the solitude. Forty days with no friends or family or even passers-by. As much as those of us who profess to be introverts might sometimes think otherwise, this is just as bad, if not worse, than the hunger. We are social beings by nature. To be deprived of human contact is to face a crushing agony of the harsh, empty wilderness.

Perhaps for the first time since Creation, God was alone. Alone with thoughts, prayers, and fasting—and the devil.

Who is this shadowy figure who dares to tempt Christ?

It is hard to talk about the devil because popular culture has made him both comical and minimal—and of course the devil likes it this way. It's hard to take the Halloween-costume devil—with the red nylon skinsuit and the horns and the plastic pitchfork seriously. As if the devil would really be so obvious!

But the devil is subtle. The devil is crafty. The devil never misses a day in church and he can quote scripture just as well as any preacher. And what is it that the devil tempts Jesus with? It all seems so reasonable.

“You are hungry, you have power. Command the stone to become bread.” And beneath that temptation is the subtle suggestion: think of all the hungry people you could feed if you just do this little thing!

The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. “To you I will give their glory and all this authority, for it has been given over to me and I give it to anyone I please.” (And that claim, if it holds even an ounce of truth, should give any of us who aspire to worldly authority pause)

And then, atop the temple: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” In other words: prove it. Imagine, a display of such divine power in front of all the religious and political authorities in Israel! Could anyone deny that Jesus was truly God if he floated down from the clouds like Superman?

All of these temptations seem so reasonable, so commonsense. The devil is good at that. But beneath all the temptation lies a common thread. Prove your power. Rule the world. Show them your divinity.

The response of Jesus is simple. True worship and obedience to God lies not in the exultation of self but in humility, self-denial, and love. The devil offers no argument, and I think he departs more confused than angry. The enemy cannot understand—or has made himself incapable of understanding—why someone possessing such great power would choose not to use that power for his own benefit.

After all, what are a few loaves of bread? What’s a little bit of pageantry, if it will win over the masses? Why not offer a little bit of worship if it will get you all the power in the world?

Temptation is like it, and our lives are absolutely full of it. Indulge a little, it will make you feel better. Tell a little lie, get the promotion. Do whatever it takes to get ahead. Take what you want. You deserve it. Don’t be a chump, what are you, a sucker?

When we venture out into the wilderness—either voluntarily or driven there by the seasons of our lives—we join Jesus in experiencing that tempting voice. In this time of sacrifice and penitence, we train ourselves to turn to God, to lay our weaknesses before the Creator and cry out for deliverance.

Our reading from Corinthians on Ash Wednesday spoke of a God who “made him to be sin who knew no sin.” Our Lenten Eucharistic liturgy speaks of Christ, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. There’s a strange sense (a temptation, if you will) to think that because Jesus resisted the devil’s temptation that he does not really know what temptation is—that God’s perfection rejects human imperfection. Yet I think this misunderstands the nature of temptation.

To resist temptation is to feel it all the more strongly. Anyone who has ever struggled with any addiction knows this well. The first day is easy. Then comes the second day. And the third day. And after the moment has passed come the regrets. If only I’d gotten that promotion. If only I’d taken that shortcut. Imagine what I could have done with that money, that power, that prestige!

After forty days in the wilderness, God knew well what it was to be hungry and alone. And yet Christ held firm. In Matthew’s account angels come to feed Jesus after the devil departs, but here in Luke there is no such “reward” – just a return to work, a return to ministry, a return to the mission of God.

And so it goes with us. When we venture into the wilderness it is in search of the Living God, who has saved us and loved us and calls out to us. If we listen and attune our hearts to love, the voice of God is greater than any temptation.