

It is an old, old story. It may be one of the oldest stories in all of human storytelling, the story of the struggle in the wilderness. The Bible has a few notable ones. There is Jacob who flees home after he steals his brother's birthright. Jacob dreams of the ladder reaching into heaven and realizes God is with him in that lonely place. Jacob, many years later returning home, out in the wilderness encounters a stranger in the night with whom he wrestles, and who blesses him and gives him a new name – Israel! Moses flees from Pharaoh, a fugitive prince out in the wilderness, but when he arrives in Midian, he is a man seeking a new identity. Later, Moses will lead God's people into the wilderness where they are transformed from frightened slaves of Pharaoh into a people who know they belong to God. And the prophet Elijah flees into the wilderness from Jezebel who wants to kill him and arrives at the mountain of God where he knows God in a new and life-giving way and where he receives a new mission.

The wilderness is an important place. Something is bound to happen out there in the wilderness. One way or another.

In the movie, “The Edge”, Alec Baldwin and Anthony Hopkins are stranded out in the wilderness of Alaska. A memorable line that Hopkins has is in response to a question of whether they will survive or not. He answers that “people who are lost in the wilderness die of shame”; that shame drives a soul to act in ways that are ultimately destructive. The story in that movie is not just the men and their choices, it is the fact of the wilderness, creating a pressure cooker in which they have to choose and act.

Jesus is led by the Spirit in the wilderness. Like all those other people in the Bible the Son of God must go out into the unknown wastelands and deal with himself and with the loyalties that make a claim on human life, and also loyalties that vie with God for authority. How Jesus deals with the wilderness sets a model for those who will follow him.

The hills of Galilee and northern Israel are made of stone and are covered with stones. If you had the power to make all those stones into bread, it would be a shame not to, wouldn't it? Just because you can does not mean that it is good to do. Jesus is obedient to the Spirit of the law, that bread is good, but expediency, momentary satisfaction, even the

wholesale response to a problem may not be the best course. “One does not live by bread alone but by every word that is spoken by the mouth of God.”

I once heard a church leader try to convince a man who wanted to write a big check to fund a mission project after Hurricane Katrina to please wait until the situation ripened a bit – until enough insight was gained and the directions for using resources was established. The man was not to be deterred. He was angry, and threatened to not give anything. He wanted to write a big check to pay for one narrow thing, even though at the moment it was needed, it would not be so necessary in a few days. The need would be somewhere else then. This patient, mission minded leader relied on some other scripture – like “a soft answer turns away trouble”, and “he who humbles himself will be exalted.” He took his time and was able to connect with the man and discover what he had done in life and was able to help him understand the situation in a context similar to the man’s industry. And the man was converted to new thinking and wound up funding parts of the project again and again, far beyond what his one powerful check would have accomplished.

In the wilderness of this great mission need, in the wilderness of the man's angry insistence, in the wilderness of the church leader's helplessness, acting out of shame was a live option. Obedience to Christ made way for action that was life-giving for everyone involved.

There are a couple of places in the gospels where it says that the people were ready to proclaim Jesus king; and on Palm Sunday it is suggested that a sizable number of people may have been ready to set Jesus up as king in place of the Roman Governor. The Devil presents Jesus with the golden opportunity to become the new Caesar, to have all the instruments of worldly power at his disposal in order to put in place the kingdom of God. Just one thing – worldly power always has a string attached, compromise and collaboration with evil.

In our Sunday evening class we have been watching a series of stories presented by a Methodist church history professor, Tex Sample. He told how he grew up going to Sunday School with a really great teacher who, though very knowledgeable about the Bible also was a racist and he inserted racist comments and a racist slant to all he taught. At the same time in his church there was a woman who was a retired missionary from S.

Korea who introduced he and other children in the church to things about Korean culture and taught them Christian songs from Korea. The young Tex Sample then had to work out his own faith over two distinctly different messages from two people he both admired and respected, facing the question of the wilderness of racism. But he came to realize that his Sunday School teacher took the gospel and put it inside his racism to justify it. The missionary put the racism inside the gospel and dismantled it.

The devil said that it would be a shame not to use these worldly things to accomplish some of what Jesus wanted to accomplish. Jesus leads us to where there is no shame, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.”

Psalm 91 makes some large claims about the outcomes of faithfulness to God. We know what Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote about, “bad things happen to good people.” The world is a tough place, in many respects it is dangerous, people get sick and hurt, even the best kind of people. It is a pretty awful thing to put out there as a taunt – “put yourself in a position to be badly injured and surely God will protect you. It would

be a shame for people to know that you were afraid to trust God that much.”

It is a terrible taunt when we come to Holy Week and to Jesus’ arrest and humiliation on Thursday, and to his suffering and death on Friday.

Truly here is the awful fact that the very best person may still endure the very worst suffering. God does not swoop in to take away the pain or to slay the wicked. Yet, in the midst of his suffering Jesus is shown to keep faith and to trust in God’s goodness and God’s way. Jesus does not look at the terrible thing and then by comparison decide that somehow God is powerless or that God does not care. To do that is to put God to the test.

I told someone recently about an old friend, Bill Kent, who suffered a very painful heart attack and then a quintuple bypass and a long, tough recovery. I saw him in the hospital and he said he had spent some time feeling pretty sorry for himself, lost in the wilderness of self-pity. The timing of this event was particularly bad and so he had spent some time thinking, “why me? Why me?” Then he prayed about it and he took his pain and anger and frustration to God. He came to a new place in prayer, and he sat up in his bed and thought, “Why not me?” And how fortunate to

live in this place and time. He felt himself delivered into a new place where the test was not concerning God's faithfulness – but he was being tested to see just how much goodness and blessing might be revealed in this wilderness struggle that would deepen and strengthen him for the long haul.

There are lots of ways that the church and people of Christian faith are in the wilderness these days – and we are easily led into all manner of responses rising out of the shame we experience on a variety of levels. Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. It is an important place where direction is discovered in obedience to God. There is no avoiding the wilderness, but it does not have to be a place of shame and gloomy darkness where we are lost, by the grace of God it can become a place of growth and change and new life. Jesus is with us, full of the Holy Spirit, in the wilderness. Let us have courage in the desert places, to discover the things Jesus has for us there. Amen.