

40 days. In Jewish numerology, 40 means “a lot.” 40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, 40 days and nights the rain came down while Noah was in the ark. And now Jesus, immediately after his baptism, after hearing God’s voice declare, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” is driven into the wilderness for 40 days. I imagine that does feel like quite *a lot* to take in, *a lot* to endure. In this wilderness Satan is tempting Jesus and wild beasts are lurking in the shadows. Mark only spends two verses glossing over these 40 days, sandwiched between Jesus’ baptism and his declaration of his mission in Galilee, but 40 is *a lot*. 40 is especially *a lot* if you’ve given up sweets for Lent, or alcohol, or swearing. 40 is also *a lot* if you’ve added lenten disciplines of journaling, fasting, being nice to your co-worker, or more regular prayer.

This first Sunday in Lent we think about these 40 days ahead of us, which began with ashes on our forehead this past week – reminding us of our mortality. Our dust-ness. This reminder of death can feel like *a lot*. As can the dusty wilderness of Lent. These 40 days.

Wilderness seems like a scary or at least unpleasant place for most of us. It’s the word we use to describe those parts of our lives where we have felt lost, times when we were overwhelmed with grief, times we have felt alone or deserted. Wilderness does not usually conjure up happy memories.

But it’s interesting that in our text it is not Satan that lures Jesus into the wilderness, but the Spirit that drives him there. The Spirit that has just descended on him like a dove as he emerged soaking wet from the Jordan; this is the Spirit who immediately drives him out.

With the Spirit leading, we have to wonder if maybe the wilderness is not all bad. There are surely some of you who enjoy some wilderness, (minus Satan and the wild beasts, of course), who crave the quiet of wilderness away from city life, a place to be with your own thoughts, to reconnect with nature. A time to live lighter. Maybe ever freer.

A young man named Chris did just that. He graduated from law school at Emory. But instead of moving on to a lucrative career, he gave away his \$24,000 savings to charity, burned his identification and his remaining cash and began his journey, internally and externally, into the wilderness. He eventually headed to a national park in Alaska to “live off the land for a few months,” seeking to escape society and find himself. To be free. As he journeyed, he diligently wrote about his transformational experiences and thoughts in a journal. Although tragically he himself did not survive this wilderness, his story did. His journal was turned into a book by Jon Krakauer and *Into the Wild* was made into a movie in 2007.

Most of us do not seek the wilderness as Chris did, but none of us can escape it. We probably don’t even need the Lenten season to bring us back here each year. We live with wilderness in our lives. Losing a job, dealing with illness, getting our heart broken, feeling lost in general.

Part of being in the wilderness is the feeling of 40, the feeling of *a lot*, perhaps even too much – if only too much silence or emptiness. Rarely do we see a quick way out – and mostly we simply feel the presence of Satan and wild beasts. But there is another presence in this wilderness. Not only is Satan present, and wild beasts, but there are angels. Even in this deserted place, Jesus and we are not alone. Yet the presence of angels is often difficult for us to see and feel in our darkest wildernesses, perhaps only visible, if at all, only after leaving the wilderness.

Mostly, when we're in the midst of it, all we can notice is that we're tired and thirsty, the refreshing waters of baptism a distant memory.

Having run out of water, and being far from civilization, a woman wandering through the wilderness of the desert must have felt like she saw an angel when off in the distance she saw an old water pump. Wired to the handle of the old pump was a baking powder can with a letter inside. The letter said:

*This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one forth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. [signed] Desert Pete. P.S. Don't go drinkin' up the water first. Prime the pump with it, and you'll git all you can hold.**

Promise and temptation. Tired and parched, seeing that bottle of water, your dry mouth beginning to imagine the cool, clean, refreshing water on your tongue. But what if the well doesn't work anymore and you waste the bottle of water? On the other hand, once you drink the bottle of water, that's it. After that quick drink there is still no more water in this desert – perhaps for miles. And certainly no water for the next wanderer who finds this baking powder can wired to this well of hope.

Temptation is to settle for less. A quick drink that will ultimately still leave you thirsty.

Matthew and Luke are more explicit about the type of temptation that Jesus endured in his wilderness. Much of it had to do with settling for less than his baptismal identity as beloved Son of God. Opportunities to drink the bottle of water instead of trusting the pump which promises abundant, gushing, ever-flowing water. Opportunities to bow to the kingdom of this world, gaining power, rather than announcing that God's kingdom has come near.

Immediately after our baptism, we probably were not driven into the wilderness. Our over-protective parents were worried enough about the water on our heads. But post-baptism, we have had no shortage of wilderness time. Temptations to stray from God's promise; "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased." Temptation to settle for less, instead of the *a lot* God has promised.

Lent is an invitation into the wilderness. An invitation to prime the pump: to quiet down, to make more space in our lives for God, to confess and repent of the ways we settle for less than God. We don't have to go to the wilderness. Perhaps we feel like we've been there enough. We could spend our next 40 days doing any number of things. But Lent is not just about wilderness. Our biblical stories tell us wilderness is also a place of transformation. Maybe looking back at various points in our lives, we can see the transformative power of such deserted places. Becoming free like the Israelites leaving Egypt, renewing the earth and all creation like Noah and the flood, seeking peace and grounding in nature like Chris, claiming identity like Jesus. Entering this Lenten wilderness is about trusting that the pump will supply us with *all we can hold* and that angels are present even amongst the wild beasts.

Interestingly, the word Lent does not mean darkness, or even wilderness, it means, "spring." Little tiny signs of life entering into our desert. The hope of new life built right into the nature of Lent, buried like notes from Desert Pete in the wilderness.

If we can enter in to these 40 days, the *a lot* of the Lenten wilderness becomes the *a lot* of God's abundance and new life, the spring of creation. *Prime the pump, you'll git all you can*

hold. And the One who primes the pump declares to each of us, “you are my child, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.” And the abundance of the kingdom gushes out of Jesus when he leaves his wilderness, announcing the spring of God’s kingdom. It has come near. Repent. Turn. Be transformed. Have faith. The well has never run dry.

*Story from Keither Miller and Bruce Larson, *The Edge of Adventure: Finding What’s Real While Looking for God*, as told in Gene Robinson’s book *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God*. P. 87