

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
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“In Life and in Death We Belong to God: Wilderness as Instruction”
Matthew 4: 1-11
First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017

At the close of the third chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, we read that just as Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan River where he has been baptized by John, “the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We can imagine beads of baptismal water still clinging to the tendrils of Jesus’s hair as the events recounted in today’s Gospel reading from Matthew 4: 1-11 occur.

What do you picture in your mind when you hear the term, “wilderness experience?”

I typed “wilderness experience” into the search engine. And what should appear but an advertisement for Outward Bound? Exquisitely photographed, it showed towering fir trees, craggy rocks, and pristine lakes, and it promised that when one comes out on the other side of the “high-impact activities in a wilderness setting” one will be able to say, “If I can do this, I can do anything.”

On this first Sunday in Lent, the lectionary invites Christians into Jesus’s wilderness experience. Often we focus on the three temptations which the devil proffered to Jesus in the desert. Episcopal priest Nurya Love Parish has written of how she, who was not raised by or among Christians, read an essay on Jesus’s temptations, and when she read this sentence, “The tradition teaches that temptations stand for pride, power, and possession,” all of a sudden her soul said “Aha!” as a puzzle piece clicked into place. In that moment she realized that Jesus’s story was also her story, and so began her journey along a road of conversion to the Christian faith. (1)

I have a hunch that the gospel writer Matthew would feel a shiver of satisfaction run up and down his spine to hear that his account of Jesus’s temptations amid his wilderness experience had affected Nurya Love Parish so deeply for clearly Matthew, writing for a predominantly Jewish congregation, wanted to get across to his audience that the temptations which Jesus faced were Israel’s temptations, historically speaking, and thus their own human temptations. Matthew told the story of Jesus’s temptations to reflect the same sequence of the temptations (2) which God’s people faced in the 40-year wilderness trek between Egypt and the Promised Land. Clearly, the best review that Matthew could ever hear from a reader would be the response, “Aha! The story of Jesus is *my* story too!”

It is entirely appropriate to focus on the specifics of the three temptations, but in the remainder of the sermon, I intend to focus on Matthew’s introduction to the temptation story, his purpose statement, if you will.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.”

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit [the same Spirit, you remember, who had descended upon him and named him Beloved at his baptism] into the wilderness.”

This purpose statement suggests that Jesus’s confrontation with evil was instructive. Jesus, whose primary identity in Matthew is as a Teacher, had to be taught himself, through experience, that easy living is not a part of claiming one’s identity as a Child of God. His struggle, his wilderness experience, was necessary, it would seem, so that he could pass on this experiential knowledge to those who would count themselves as members in the company of Jesus’s disciples, the company of disciples which includes not only those who surrounded him in his first-century setting, but also includes you and me.

When I read that Jesus was *led* into the wilderness by the same Spirit which had pronounced him Beloved, the image which rises up in my mind is that of the *paidagogos*, a tutor, a guardian and guide of boys in the ancient Greek and Roman culture. These trustworthy slaves were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys as they grew into adulthood.

The Holy Spirit thus becomes the *paidagogos* taking Jesus by the hand and leading him to the schoolhouse door. In our own day, we might picture the Holy Spirit as the mom driving off in her minivan after dropping off her treasured son for his first week of sleepaway camp or the dad putting his treasured daughter on the plane to head off to a year of study abroad in a faraway country.

Now, I must hasten to say that when we read that God’s Spirit led Jesus into a wilderness marked by wrenching struggle with evil, we dare not read this to say that God causes evil or that God wills evil in order to accomplish God’s purposes.

In a recent sermon, I shared with you how the book *Children of Pride* has influenced my life. There is a sermon which holds a similar place in shaping my life. I should note to you that I didn’t hear the sermon preached, but I have read it hundreds of times, I suppose.

It is the sermon that William Sloane Coffin preached in Riverside Church ten days after the accidental death of his 24-year-old son Alex. It is as brave and as honest a sermon as there is. If there has been even a smidgeon of bravery or honesty in any sermon that I have preached, it is only because there are many preachers who have been teachers to me in showing me how, and William Sloane Coffin is among them, I am grateful to say.

As to the role that God plays when it comes to wilderness experiences—and can anyone imagine an experience that is more “wilderness” than the death of one’s child, William Sloane Coffin preached, “When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said...’I just don’t understand the will of God.’...For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with a finger on the trigger, a fist around a knife, hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths...The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is ‘It is the will of God.’ Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

William Sloane Coffin went on to say that in addition to knowing that God’s heart was broken, “Another consolation will be the learning—which better be good, given the price.”

This is the line that brings us back to Matthew's purpose statement in today's Gospel lesson. This is the line that has impacted my theology, my ministry, my life so profoundly.

On those days when I have faced tragedy or sorrow or disappointment or physical or spiritual fatigue so deep that I could hardly bear it, I have been grateful for a preacher who was also a grieving dad who said, Consolation will come with the learning from this experience. His words pointed me to a Savior who was brave to become a student of his wilderness experiences so that he might become Teacher to us all telling us that God is good and that no matter how strong the evil, how deep the hurt, how precarious the future, how frightening the wilderness, in life and in death, we belong not to the wilderness, but to God.

1. Nurya Love Parish, "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, February 15, 2017, 21.
2. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 35.