

Date: February 29, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Lent 1

**SERMON: A Wilderness Survival Guide**

Text(s): Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8-13

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Shortly before we left our mission service in Sarawak, on the island of Borneo, to return to the United States, we spent a weekend with a friend who was a wildlife officer for the government at a wilderness area along the northwest coast of Borneo. There the government had established a 40,000 acre sanctuary for proboscis monkeys. It was a true wilderness. No human inhabitants at all, not even tribespeople. Just primary tropical rainforest, a lovely clear river that emerged from the jungle and joined the South China Sea. At a lovely beach near the mouth of that river, the wildlife department had set up camp in a couple of rough wooden cabins with thatched palm-leaf roofs. After the noise and busyness of the city, it was a real treat to get away from it all in such an unspoiled place. One day we traveled about two miles around the headland in a small wooden boat with an outboard motor, and came upon one of the most gorgeous tropical beaches it's possible to imagine. Just like some of those travel posters you see or TV commercials of a tropical paradise. A perfect arc of white sand fringed with coconut palms and casurina trees stretched for about a mile or so along the crystal-clear blue-green waters. Just offshore was a coral reef close to the surface. Behind the beach, a mountain rose steeply, and a small fresh-water stream tumbled down the mountain. We sat in that stream in a large pool, water up to our necks, enjoying the coolness. Sound inviting? It was a delightful experience.

But, not one of us would have wanted to stay there very long. For one thing, the travel poster wouldn't have given you any idea of the furnace-like heat or the 90% humidity on that beach. Nor would it have shown the sand flies, which were it not for our heavy application of insect repellent, would have eaten us alive. (The

mosquitoes would have done the same at night). And we were about two hours by boat from the nearest village or town where there were any communications or supplies. A tropical rainforest is a beautiful place, but deadly if you don't know how to live in it or if you're not equipped for it. It was a great place to visit with friends for a few hours, but none of us would have liked to have been there alone

Today is the first Sunday in the six-week season of Lent on the Christian calendar. And the idea of the wilderness as a place of both refuge and danger is an appropriate metaphor for this season. The story of Jesus' forty-day period of testing in the wilderness is the model for learning how to use this season productively as a means by which we can grow spiritually.

Normally, we tend to think of the wilderness as an idyllic refuge from the fast-paced, hectic, confusing world in which we live; we talk of "getting away from it all," when we go on a wilderness camping trip or a hike in the mountains. But that's because we're not planning to live there permanently or forced to stay there. A camping trip is just that— a camping trip. The beauty and purity of the natural wilderness, in small doses, is restorative, but we know we're only there for a vacation; we're not there to survive by the law of tooth and claw, any more than the contestants on the reality TV show (or Ureality TV show "Survivor") are really staking their very lives on the games they play.

When we choose to go into the wilderness to get away from it all— the noise of civilization, the stresses generated by our jobs or our overcrowded calendars or our failing relationships or burnout or whatever "it" is— we suddenly discover we've brought "it" all with us, because it's inside us. As one wise person put it, "The trouble is, wherever I go, I go too." And that's when we discover that though we've come to the wilderness for refuge, there's a spiritual wilderness inside us as well, a wilderness that is full of wild and dangerous things. When we're in a place of solitude like a mountain trail or even the solitude of a retreat center or our own living

rooms when no one else is around, the noise within us can be deafening. Perhaps that's why so many people cannot stand to be alone for very long or cannot stand silence, so they always must have the radio or TV on— they need noise around them to drown out the noise within them.

Sometimes we're dropped into the wilderness when we're least expecting it. A crisis comes upon us without warning; we lose a job or a spouse or our marriage begins to break apart or someone we called friend betrays us or we wake up to the fact that our life is empty of real meaning and purpose or we have to cope with the onset of a debilitating and possibly life-threatening disease. And suddenly, we discover ourselves very much alone, deep in the wilderness. Whether our sojourn in the wilderness is a voluntary one— to “get away from it all,” to go on retreat, or whether we, like Jesus, are “led” (or “driven” at St. Mark puts it) into the wilderness by some crisis, the wilderness is a lonely place of solitude that is full of threat. Can we survive?

Carl Jung once had a patient who came to him because he was having real difficulties at work. (Bill Geoghegan might know if this story is apocryphal or not, but even if it is, it's true.) Somehow, this man always ended up alienating his colleagues. At home, he was irritable and harsh with his family. He didn't like being this way, but he couldn't seem to change. So he went to see Dr. Jung. In the interview, Jung discovered that the man was driven by his need to be a success to the point where he was a workaholic, often staying at the office 14 hours a day. Jung said, “I believe I can help you. For the next two weeks, this is what I want you to do. Go to work every day, but work no longer than eight hours. Come straight home, eat dinner with your family, and try to be really present to them. Don't talk about your work. Listen to them tell you about their lives that day. After dinner, go into your study, close the door, and sit there completely alone without doing any work until

bedtime. Then come back and we'll talk again.”

Two weeks later the man returned and he was not much better, if at all. Jung asked him if he had followed the regimen he had described. “Yes,” the man said, “I worked only eight hours each day, I came home and ate dinner with my family, and then I went into my study every evening until bedtime.”

“Tell me about your time in the study,” said Jung.

“Well, I usually put on a record of Mozart or Beethoven, sat down in my chair, and read a novel by Thomas Mann. I smoked my pipe and had a glass of cognac.”

“You misunderstood what I asked you to do,” replied Jung. “I didn't want you to be in your study with Mozart or Beethoven or Thomas Mann or your pipe or your cognac. I wanted you to be there with only your self.”

The man was horrified. “I can't think of any worse company,” he exclaimed.

“And yet,” replied Carl Jung, “that is the self you've been inflicting on others 14 hours a day.”

There comes a point for most of us, I suspect, where, like Carl Jung's patient, we realize that the only self we have, the inner reality we know is an illusion. And we can't think of any worse company to be in. So we shun the wilderness because we can't bear to face being alone with ourselves. And yet that fact is precisely why we need the solitude of the wilderness.

*“Solitude,” says Henri Nouwen, “is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude, we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. . . Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter--the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself to us as the substance of our new self.”*

The story of Jesus' own experience of solitude in the wilderness, underscores both our

need for the wilderness and the struggles and dangers that await us there. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that immediately after his baptism, when Jesus became aware of his vocation, the Spirit led (or drove) him into the wilderness to test his knowledge of his true self, to test his commitment to his vocation in solitude.

The tests that Jesus faced there in the wilderness were the same tests we all face if we seriously set about trying to free ourselves from the compulsions and the illusions of our society and live lives that are authentic and focused and faithful. Jesus faced the temptations of being a pleaser—turn the stones into bread and the people will love you; the temptation of power—sell your soul to me and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world; the temptations to use any means to gain the desired end—throw yourself off the temple and just watch the crowds flock to you. These are the same temptations that confront us too. The devil doesn't have any new tricks; the old tricks just come in new packages.

Jesus used his time in the wilderness to face the tests. In the solitude, he faced the strong inner voices that called him to give in to the desire for power, giving everyone what they wanted, of becoming a celebrity. He repeatedly took refuge in his relationship of dependence upon God. As each temptation shook him, he confessed that there is no God but God, that the only power, success, or fame that counted was that which came from following God's will faithfully and allowing God's spirit to lead him and work through him for the good of others rather than by trying to manipulate and control things himself and advance his own interests at the expense of others.

And that knowledge of our total dependence on God and our interdependence with others, is, finally, what the wilderness has to teach us. That is what we learn in the furnace of transformation, in that solitude that we do not often seek, but which we cannot ultimately avoid. The false self which must be burned away is the

self that says, "I can do it by myself. Whatever I've got or whatever I'm going to get, I'll get myself." The new self which emerges from the furnace, refined and purified of its illusions is the self that recognizes our radical dependence upon God for everything, and our total interdependence on one another.

It was to give us the wilderness survival skills that the Church developed the season of Lent. Lent is a time for deliberately entering the wilderness experience in a creative and redemptive way. Lent offers us an opportunity to be intentional about self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-transformation. Traditionally, Christians have adopted certain practices during Lent, such as fasting or denying oneself some legitimate pleasure or deliberately setting aside time each day for prayer or meditation on the scriptures or observing regular times of silence, or taking on a particular discipline at some point in your life where self-discipline is lacking are all practices that have been proven to help us develop the inner integrity, the inner focus, the inner authenticity that help us keep our true selves in focus.

These Lenten disciplines, such as fasting, can easily be trivialized if we do them for the wrong reasons. For example, giving up desserts for Lent because we want to lose weight and it seems as good a way as any to get six weeks of dieting in, is not really what fasting is all about. If the fast is for the sake of bringing our out-of-control appetites under control, or if it is undertaken sacrificially as a way of identifying with those who are hungry, then it can be a very useful tool in our survival kit. If it's just "giving up chocolate for Lent" in order to feel good about ourselves or feel that we're earning brownie points for our piety, or to lose a couple pounds, it's just one more illusion of our false selves that we're deceived by. Any discipline, if it is to be meaningful, must have as its aim, the growth of self-discipline and mastery of those things which prevent us from realizing our true

selves in God. The purpose of all such disciplines, remember, is survival in a hostile wilderness.

Developing such survival skills is not easy. Just as the training regimen for an athlete is hard until the muscles and sinews and coordination reach a certain point of development, when the athlete is freed to perform at her best, so the disciplines of the spirit are hard at first too, until our souls are formed and trained. The fourth-century Church Father, St. Gregory of Nazianzus put it this way:

*Labor awaits you, soul, great labor,  
If you would know yourself,  
the what, the whither, and the whence,  
the way of now behaving—  
whether it should be as it is  
or whether more is expected;  
labor awaits you, soul, and a purer life.*

When we engage in that labor, when we learn the survival skills the wilderness demands of us, then we will discover that the wilderness, however harsh it may seem at the time, is indeed a place of beauty, where our spirits are refreshed, our faith renewed, our courage restored, and our hope reclaimed. And we can return to our place of work, the places where life has to be lived, with the power to live it abundantly and with joy.