

Lent: Putting Flesh on the Bones of Faith
New Members Sunday
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Matthew 3:14-17; 4:1-11

On the NPR Thursday afternoon program, "Human Kind" Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., son of the late senator Robert Kennedy, and nephew of President John F. Kennedy said that in every religion the critical awakening of its key figure happens in the wilderness. Greater than any religious book or doctrine is creation itself, the blueprint of the Creator of us all.

You heard from Vince last week of how Moses fled to the wilderness where he encountered God in a burning bush. Australian Aborigines have their walkabout, and Native Americans have their vision quest to find their true purpose in life. The Gautama became the Buddha meditating under the Bodhi tree. Muhammad retreated to a cave in the mountains around Mecca to receive his calling.

The first thing to realize about the temptation of Jesus is that before it is temptation, it is a journey to nature and creation. So, before we consider any other elements of our Lenten journey let each of us remember to include as part of our Lenten intention, a time in nature, listening for the heartbeat of God and looking for a new sense of ourselves.

The interesting thing about Jesus' journey to the wilderness is that it follows his baptism, which is a Big Thing. At his baptism, the heavens open up, a dove descends and alights on Jesus, and a voice from heaven cries out, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." That's heady stuff, the only time I can think of in the gospels where God speaks out loud. It's something of a spiritual Heisman trophy moment. It's the kind of experience that can make you feel like you should run a Super Bowl ad to claim how wonderful it was that you were born.

And it's dangerous. Too much glory early in life can lead to a premature sense that you're God's gift to the earth, and preachers and prophets who believe this about themselves are a dime a dozen. Jesus could have recruited everyone standing slack-jawed at sight and sound of God by the Jordan River to become his disciples. But one thing that distinguished Jesus from other prophets and preachers of his time was that he paused after this Olympic moment and went off to the wilderness, into creation, to focus that vision.

What is interesting to me about Lent is that before it puts flesh on the bones of faith, it strips faith down to the bones.

Jesus' forty days and nights of fasting and prayer in the wilderness are meant to be a model for Lent. How many of you have ever fasted, let's say for a day? Three days? Longer?

I once fasted for three days. It was hard. Longer than that becomes something of a hunger strike. Where are other references to the number 40 in the bible? The flood – Moses in the wilderness – and 40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness following the Exodus. In the bible 40 days and nights is simply a way of saying it was a long time.

The bible is essentially telling us that Jesus went off for his own time of testing and focusing, alone, in nature for a long time. At the end of his time, he encounters three temptations. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that the devil comes to tempt Jesus. I have problems believing in the devil as the source of temptation.

First, there's no devil in the most authentic sayings and stories of Jesus such as the beatitudes or other stories of the Sermon on the Mount, or even in the most well known parables such as the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. Second, having a devil gives us a problem of a dualism in which we have with a God who loves us and directs our ways, and a devil out to do us harm. I can't affirm that. Third, the devil in these temptations is too similar to the Pharisees, suggesting an anti Jewish, anti-Semitic inclination of the gospel writer. Fourth, even today, the rabid fundamentalists are the ones who see the devil lurking in every dark corner of questions, social change or, for that matter, Halloween.

Instead, I like to think of this story as Jesus encountering his own shadow, the temptations he will face in his life that will spring from within him. After a long time of fasting and praying, Jesus encounters his own demons, as it were. He has to discover who he truly is, what matters most, and what he will do with his spiritually gifted life.

This is where the stripping down the flesh to the bones takes place. Each temptation would be quite natural for someone who wears the human face of God (an incarnation, which by the way is the meaning of avatar). If I had just heard God's voice choosing me at my baptism, I would imagine all the great things I could do to fix the world.

Jesus has been fasting for a long time, so his first temptation is to turn the stones around him into bread. If he is truly the son of God, as the voice from heaven declared, he should be able to do this. All the reflections I've read on this passage suggest the temptation is to feed the world. I think that as hungry as he was, the first element of the temptation would be to feed himself. But Jesus catches himself, remembering the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 8:3, that one does not live by bread alone.

His second temptation is to climb to the highest peak throw himself off and fly, counting on God and angels to bear him up. This time he doesn't wait to answer his temptation with scripture. He uses scripture to justify the temptation, quoting Psalm 91, "God will send angels to bear you up (wow this is a lot like "Avatar" too)." Jesus answers

his own temptation with the book of Deuteronomy, the reminder not to test God.

The third challenge is to have the whole world worship and follow him. Being the esteemed and unquestioned ruler of the entire world would solve a lot. And Jesus answers himself with another quote from Deuteronomy 6:13, "Worship God, and God alone."

What touches me deeply about this story is that Jesus goes off to creation, the wilderness, to fast, pray and focus his faith, and ironically he instead receives this overwhelming urge to use his gifts to become a kind of first century Superhero. But somehow, stripped down to the hunger that goes with 40 days of no food, Jesus realizes that these are not the tasks of faith he is to live. He won't feed his own personal dreams of grandiosity. Rather he will live with the same human limitations as rest of us.

Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness gives me a new way look at Lent this year. I often have a hard time following through on my Lenten spiritual practices. Usually, whatever I seek to give up, change, or reconsider in my life comes back at me with an unexpected force that refuses to be banned, buried, or bottled up. My attempts at kindness get sidetracked to insensitivity. My promises to listen turn me into even more of a conversation hog.

On our last sabbatical, Sandy and I went away for a month, virtually alone, to a cabin at the end of a long dirt driveway at the end of a winding road on top of a mountain at the western end of North Carolina. It was wilderness for us.

There Sandy found one of my favorite quotes from Pema Chodron. "Our demons, clearly seen, slowly begin to wear themselves out." We both saw our demons out there. But before they wore themselves out, they rose up with a frenzy. Sandy and I both wrestled with those demons in that time in our wilderness. Eventually they did wear themselves out. I'm reminded of a paraphrase of Jesus, "The truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable."

The beginning of any serious Lenten journey is likely to be like this time of temptation for Jesus. Our demons will try to bump aside our better angels. And we may well feel exhausted without the resources to finish the journey before we've even begun.

But if we pursue, and this is the big if, because Lent is not for wimps, I believe those demons will wear themselves out. I believe we, like Jesus, will find a new direction for our lives and journeys that isn't trying to be superheroes in our own time, but rather one of walking a deeper, truer path for our lives, a path to rebirth and resurrection.

At the very end of this story of wilderness, Matthew writes that when Jesus finished his fast, exhausted, angels came and ministered to him.

I walked into the noon Ash Wednesday service this week all set to do my usual ministry, to greet people at the door, direct them to their

spiritual stations, and then stand by the ashes and anoint the worshipers as they came to my station. Sandy gently reminded me, “Andy and I are leading this service. You and Vince will join me in leadership at the evening service. Enjoy your half-time ministry and simply sit and experience Ash Wednesday.”

So I became a pilgrim, a worshiper on Ash Wednesday. I went to the stations, contemplated my path, wrote my Lenten promise on my book mark, picked up my rock with my word for lent, received my ashes from Andy, sat down, read my meditative scripture.

Something in me broke open in me in my readings and meditation. I was stripped down to the bones of my faith. When Sandy gave me communion, I felt like an angel had already begun to minister to me.

I believe it’s worth plunging into the journey of Lent to look hard at who we are, what we are becoming, what we need to let go of, and where we need to move toward.

You new members are in a perfect place for this. Like Jesus at his baptism, you are in the midst of the spiritual high of joining this church. After all the hugs and support of today, I invite you into Lent, a time of reflection and going deeper.

On this first Sunday of Lent, let us all go deeper. Like the journey of Jesus in the wilderness, our journey will probably turn out differently than we expected. The tools of Lent are before us in Lenten reflection booklets and opportunities for spiritual practice. They are around us in this spiritual community and service. And they are within us in the God who appears when all our lesser gods disappear.

There is an old greeting in the Christian church - “Have a good Lent.” Given what I’ve just been saying, there’s a lot of twisted irony in that, for a real Lent is full of challenge, being turned upside down, and finding at the other end a rising where we least expected it. So in spite of all that, or perhaps because of it, I wish you all, “a good Lent”.