

## **Brave the Wilderness of Lent**

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The Negev desert in Israel is a formidable place. It is not like the flat, sandy expanse of the American West. The desert of the Bible is a vast, stone landscape, a geological wonder. Mountains of rock stretch out in the distance as far as the eye can see. Some become fantastic sculptures shaped by years of erosion. This barren land is the color of limestone and flint and the infinite blue of the horizon.

Israel's desert is a beautiful place of extremes: intense heat and cold, high wind and stillness, massive walls and emptiness. I was thrilled to hike into this biblical wilderness one summer day. As I climbed upward in my heavy boots, I imagined all those who gone before me over the millennia. I was having a real adventure in the Holy Land.

And then, there was a fine reward at the end of the day. I descended to a road that was shimmering in the heat. I looked to the left, and then to the right, and there was my prize: the air-conditioned bus. It was a vision, it was pure relief! I climbed into that cool tube, unlaced my boots, and drank sweet, cold water. I dreamed of the hot shower and soft bed that were waiting for me in the city. Oh, to visit the desert, and return to modern conveniences!

But, what happens when the bus does not come?

The Bible has many stories of people who have been left behind in that desert. The Hebrew Scriptures have a lot to say about the struggle in the wilderness. After the Exodus from Egypt, the Hebrews wandered for forty years in the desert. They craved food and water, they built idols out of desperation, they turned on their leaders, and they fought among themselves.

In the midst of this extreme experience, God gave them a complex code of law. It started with the 10 commandments, and grew to fill many pages of the Bible. Our biblical ancestors lived on the edge of chaos in the wilderness and required divine intervention for law and order.

Finally, at the end of 40 years, the Hebrews could see the edge of the desert. They looked down from a high ridge and saw green fields, something they had never seen before. They nearly went wild with relief and anticipation. By then their leader, Moses, was an old man who knew he would never reach the valley. So he stopped his people on that mountain and said, SIT DOWN; I HAVE A FEW FINAL THINGS TO SAY TO YOU.

Moses then commenced to give his farewell address.

This was a sermon that went on for days and you can read all 34 chapters of it in the book of Deuteronomy. The preacher was still on a roll when he came to our lesson today in the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter. The message of Moses was basically this:

Remember who you are and where you came from.  
Remember that it was God who preserved your life all these years.  
Remember that you will always be accountable before God.

Now, I can imagine that many people in the congregation that day were already slipping down the hill while Moses was still preaching. Dust clouds filled the horizon as those desert folks scrambled towards the exit. Perhaps this is why much of Moses' advice would often be forgotten over the years. But his words were cherished and they became a touchstone for our forebears, especially in times of crisis. Sooner or later, the people would find themselves in a new wilderness. The wise among them would recall the words of Moses and would remember who they were and where they came from. They would remind one another that God had preserved their life and was holding them accountable.

Today we recall this message as we mark the season of Lent. For 40 days and 40 nights the Church bids us to slow down and engage in self-examination, prayer and repentance. We have packed away the 'alleluias' and our expressions of joy for another season. We dwell now in a different time, in a starker place of thoughtfulness and introspection. In Lent, we enter the desert wilderness of the spirit.

A contemporary theologian named Beldon Lane writes of this experience in his book, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes. He says:

*Moving ... into the desert's emptiness, up the mountain's height, you discover in wild terrain a metaphor of your deepest fears...you experience a loss of competence, a crisis of knowing that brings you to the end of yourself, to the only true place where God is met.*

This is the work of Lent as we take on the desert mentality. We confess our limits as we climb the path toward God.

The Gospel says that Jesus went into the desert under the power of the Holy Spirit immediately following his baptism. But the bus did not come for Jesus at the end of the day. He found himself alone and hungry for forty days and nights in that desolate land. Forty days of howling winds and relentless heat. Forty days of sharp rock that sliced his hands and feet. Forty days of loneliness, and parched lips, and an empty belly. At the end of this time, Jesus had his encounter with Satan. Satan did not come on the first day when Jesus was well-fed and optimistic. Satan waited until Jesus had been pounded by the wilderness and was vulnerable.

Then, you know what happened next.

Satan tempted Jesus with delicious things. He tried to recruit Jesus with food.

He offered Jesus power to control the whole world. He enticed Jesus to become the people's idol. "Just sign here on this dotted line, Jesus, and follow me." "Sign up to glorify yourself, Jesus." "Do it your way. Let the others be damned." "Evil can be justified as the means to an end. ""Worship me, Jesus," Satan said, "and you can have it all."

It is worth noting that all of the temptations played to Jesus' strengths, not his weaknesses. The first temptation to turn stone into bread tempted Jesus' compassion for all people who are hungry. The second temptation to take the devil's shortcut to power tested Jesus' commitment to God. The third temptation to pursue his own glory tested Jesus' faith in the Kingdom of God. What an assault on the spirit!

But Jesus was under the power of the Holy Spirit, Luke tells us. And the Holy Spirit gave him the words he needed to resist Satan. Everything that Jesus says in this Gospel today comes from straight from Deuteronomy, that ancient sermon in the wilderness. Jesus remembered. He remembered who he was and where he came from. He remembered that God had already claimed him. Satan taunted Jesus by saying, "If you are the Son of God..." But Jesus remembered God's voice claiming, "You are my Son, the Beloved." Jesus remembered and Satan's temptations failed.

In this Lenten season we look honestly at our own temptations. What tests your faithfulness to God? What lures you from your desire to love and serve God? What tempts you to indifference as you live in the midst of God's blessings? How much time do you spend thinking about yourself? How much do you give to the needs of others?

Chances are your temptations are distortions of your strengths and God-given gifts. That is what makes them so tricky and powerful. If it happened to Jesus, you can bet it will happen to you and me.

I encourage you to brave the wilderness of Lent with these hard questions. Do not run back to the comfort of the air-conditioned bus just yet. Take these forty days to explore your spiritual life, even if it feels parched and dry. Perhaps you will discover the truth of the Arabic proverb: "*The further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God.*"

We do not go alone as we make our Lenten pilgrimage. The words and wisdom of our forbears and the power of the Holy Spirit travel with us. They urge us to remember. Remember who you are and where you came from. Remember that you are already claimed by God who has given you your very life. Remember that you are always accountable before God.

AMEN