

Facing the Wilderness with a Holy God: The Courage to Be Luke 4:1-13, February 21, 2010

There's a new rival to Disney in Florida these days. For 35 bucks (about half the entrance to Disney) you can visit 'The Holy Land Experience,' a theme park featuring the Great Temple of Jerusalem, Qumran caves. Some one told me you can go from the Western Wall to Qumran on a bus in three minutes. It's kind of like enjoying all the pleasures of the Holy Land without all the hassles of getting there. I'm told if you get hungry you can go to the Oasis Palms Café and munch on a Goliath burger that sells for \$5.95. The prices are reasonable. People seem to love the place. Simulation sells. You can thank Disney for that.

I didn't go to 'The Holy Land Experience' when I was in Florida recently. I've been to the real Holy Land four times.

I have to admit, I'm curious about 'The Holy Land Experience in Florida. I enjoy fantasy and simulation. But when it comes to the matters of faith and searching for the Source of my life, I'll rely on the real thing, which may not have the appeal of fantasy or simulation, but it puts me in the arena of experiences of faith recorded and handed down through the written word and faith stories of countless people. This story of Jesus' testing is one of them.

Today we're relying on Luke along with Matthew and Mark to tell us the story of Jesus being led by the Spirit having been baptized with the Spirit into a barren wilderness of desire and famish and delusion to ponder his vocation. Luke writes his version of the story and I trust the historical witness of ancient energy/spirit of God was at work in Jesus. A mission lay ahead of him. What was he to do? How was he to lead? How would he show the Almighty God to the people of his faith? The story says there was another player on the field of his heart and his best intentions. Whether you believe that 'player' was a real horned devil with a spear or you believe it was an evil spirit lurking and invading Jesus' thoughts, you know one thing: that player invades our reality. And we are tested too.

In my own life the greatest tests come not when I'm down and out, but when I'm filled with conviction and the mission up ahead looks clear and ready to begin. There's were the 'inner me' can find itself in a wrestling match. Something happens every time. You've heard the expression, 'If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans.' What does that phrase mean? Does God really laugh at our plans? I just know that 'conviction, confidence and courage' equate to a playground for all kinds of tests by the Tempter.

When the Olympic athletes are being interviewed, they often reveal the inner agony of self-doubt or looking over their shoulders at the competition. They battle to keep an inner determination

that plays and replays the scenario of having your best round on the half pipe or the ice arena a down hill slope. In Vancouver, you have the world's best athletes in a super collision, tested beyond measure. It is a veritable Mount of Temptation.

When you're the announced Son of God it's a similar picture. There's only you and your thoughts in the wilderness with the jackals and the blazing heat of day and the bitter cold of night. There's hunger and thirst. There's struggle against delusions of entitlement and enthronement. There's a temptation to abort the mission before you even start. You're competing against yourself. Who would want to go into that wilderness?

Luke says it wasn't Jesus' idea. It was part of the Spirit or Energy of God at work. Jesus might say today: 'I didn't know any of that at the start. Looking back on my life, I realized that the Spirit was there all along -through the testing and when I began my ministry in Galilee. I went to the mountain to meditate on what it means to be a Son of God, and I came down the ready to find out.' Many of us who went to school to prepare for careers will tell about fleeting moments of grandeur about a job and then say: "Well it didn't take long for that bubble to burst! Jesus' bubble burst, too, but he was armed with a reality of an inner presence of a Holy God, whose timeless words have been captured by the pens of countless pious people and filtered through their written expressions forging a Faith that has been handed.

We are to be aware of the 'inner wilderness' of our thoughts and beliefs and values. We know it is a treacherous place. • Paul Tillich wrote THE COURAGE TO BE. That's the gift the inner wilderness can give us -courage to say 'no' to those things that can destroy; courage to go on living as a children of God when nothing else makes sense. We are called to 'being' and being takes courage because it tests us. Tillich suggests that we need strength for the real battles of life - spiritual ones, the battles for living and dying and whose we will be and whether the 'me' I need to be is marked with God's imprint.

Jesus came from the wilderness with one certainty: that he was marked with the imprint of a holy God. We begin Lent with one certainty: that in the battle for who we really are, God has a claim with love and self-giving. Even as we exert our self-wills and daily choices, God has a purpose for us. Perhaps not specifically a career or what we will create... but God's purpose is that we carry a holy imprint within us. Amen.