

***"DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING?"***

*by Mary Anne Biggs*

The first Sunday in Lent  
February 14, 2016  
Romans 10:8b-13 ~ Luke 4:1-13

One evening when we lived in Texas John and I made plans to meet some friends at our favorite barbeque restaurant. I was driving my brand new van that I had just picked up from the dealer that very day. I got there first and noticed that there were places to park near the entrance, but I chose to park farther away, lest someone open their car door and dent my new van. It was early and the Texas sun was still beating down so I decided to park under some live oak trees for some much needed shade. I realized that I had passed the perfect spot so I backed up ... to back in. Big mistake. I didn't notice the low hanging tree branch until it came crashing through my rear window. Bless her heart, my friend Lynn took it upon herself to explain to John that it was really the tree's fault. For some reason he didn't think the insurance company was going to swallow that. Maybe he should have given it a try. Listen to some of these actual accident reports people have put on their insurance forms:

*"An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my car, and vanished."*

*"The indirect cause of the accident was a little guy in a small car with a big mouth."*

*"I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law, and headed over the embankment."*

We make a lot of lame excuses ourselves for why we get into trouble on the road of life, but usually it's because we just aren't paying attention. The forty days we call Lent is a time of intentional spiritual alertness. Beyond the paths of our daily routine ... and within them ... we refocus on the spiritual journey, beginning on Ash Wednesday with the reminder of that "you are dust and to dust you shall return." We are mortal, and our only hope to participate in an immortal work ... and to share in an immortal life ... is to connect somehow with the eternal God. We live so quickly ... so much on the surface of things ... seldom finding the time to reflect more deeply on what our lives mean ... or to integrate our experience into a spiritual whole. We compartmentalize our lives into sacred and secular ... work and home and church and play ... and run so rapidly from one to another. There is no center and we get fragmented. Consequently, though we believe in God and worship regularly, our connection with God can feel tenuous at best.

According to Luke, immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted. I've been told that if you have been to Israel, and driven that road from the Sea of Galilee down to Jericho with the rivulet of the Jordan on your left, the harsh wilderness to your right, you know how severe the landscape was where Jesus faced these temptations. I've never been but I've heard that it makes West Texas look like paradise. Now

some people don't like the desert, but I always have. As much as I love the trees of the North Woods there are some times when I feel the need to see above them ... to stare into an endless horizon. I feel very much at home in the desert.

And, the desert is an important symbol in the biblical story, and that is not surprising since Israel was almost surrounded by barren desert. Where did God meet Moses to call him to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt? In the wilderness. Where did Moses lead the people to meet God and make covenant? To the wilderness. Where did Israel wander as nomads for forty years before they could reach the promised land because they had rebelled and because God needed forty years for their formation as a people? In the wilderness. Where did a suicidally depressed Elijah discover that God had not abandoned him and was not finished with him and would still take care of him? In the wilderness. Where did the prophet Isaiah say the path would be made straight for the people to return to the promised land from their exile and for the promised messenger of God to come with God's salvation? Through the wilderness. And where did Jesus go to meet God and work out his destiny, to test his preparation for his mission? To the wilderness. In fact, the three world religions spawned in that arid part of the world ... Judaism, Christianity, and Islam ... found the desert as important a place as the mountain top to meet their God.

The wilderness of these stories is real, but also symbolic. In several ways the desert is clarifying. Something about the harsh environment simplifies life to the simple level of survival. Something about the desert removes other sensory distractions, allowing a person to turn inward and concentrate on God. And sometimes, at particular points in your life journey not of your choosing, wherever you live on the planet, you feel like you're in the middle of the desert. You feel alone even though you're surrounded by people. You feel starved for sustenance even though you're surrounded by plenty. Even though you are moving forward with your career and taking care of your family ... and following a good and healthy routine, you feel you are going nowhere and are wandering the barren landscape of futility. Even though you believe in God and trust in Christ and go to church, maybe even sing in the choir or serve on a board ... or maybe you're an ordained minister ... but you feel spiritually isolated and empty and God seems far away and uninterested in you.

This spiritual wilderness experience is as real as the driest desert, and any number of things can cause it ... illness, grief, depression, addiction, problems with your life partner, problems with your children, problems with your friends, or sometimes nothing you can quite put your finger on. From time to time we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness of our lives searching for God and dealing with frustration, stagnation, apathy, burnout.

But one of the chief causes of this spiritual desiccation, what John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul," is our own spiritual neglect. We have not tended our souls ... we have not maintained our spirituality ... we have not given God time ... and we have no excuse. We've forgotten where we are going and have made a wrong turn and something has hit us.

What do you do when you find yourself in this spiritual wilderness? A lot of people redouble their efforts ... throw themselves into their work, their family, their hobbies, hoping the feeling will pass. Others try to fill their emptiness with anything that lifts their spirits for a while ...

killing the pain with alcohol or prescription drugs or illegal drugs or romance or new toys or any number of distractions available in our spoiled society. But the lift lasts about as long as an amusement park ride, and the emptiness comes again. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least for a while they seem to plug the hole.

The wilderness is a place of crisis, where all your inner demons rise ... a place of character testing ... where desperation may drive you to choices that ultimately demean and destroy. The spiritual wilderness is a crisis of temptation.

But the spiritual wilderness is also a crisis of formation. Says Barbara Brown Taylor: *That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God.*

At first glance it might seem surprising that the Spirit would intentionally lead Jesus into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. After all, time is short. He needs to get busy. He has disciples to call and teach. There is always more work to be done than time in which to do it. But Jesus pulls away ... turns within ... takes the time to face down his demons and connect with God.

Most of us would never enter this spiritual wilderness intentionally. It just happens to us, and we run from it when it does. The last thing we want to do is deal with our demons. We want to deny they exist or manage them the best we can or blame someone else for causing them rather than honestly confronting and overcoming them. But Jesus chooses to gaze into the emptiness ... to engage the temptation ... to deal with the demons that are at one level uniquely his own ... and at another level common to us all. The gospel of Luke refers to Satan five times in his gospel. But in this story he uses the word *diabolos*, "devil," who is more like the accuser in the book of Job. He simply points out where Jesus' weaknesses are. These tests of character may seem like they come from the outside ... from someone else ... from some circumstance beyond our control ... from some evil power. But they have no power unless they connect with our inner weakness, so that is where the battle lies. We make our own choices and so we have no excuse.

You know what your own vulnerabilities, character flaws, crying needs, and chronic failings are. As with Jesus, our temptations rise at our places of weakness. The temptation of needing to do whatever it takes to meet our hungers ... to using our powers against others to serve ourselves ... to choosing expediency over consistency ... to deciding just this once won't really hurt ... to turning back and forth between behaviors so that we are wandering in search of an identity rather than making a long obedience in the right direction. Like Jesus, we face the temptation of pride to be more than we are ... to claim a glory that is not our own ... to have power over, rather than power with people ... to be compulsively perfectionistic. And we face the temptation to be less than we are ... to be mediocre and self-indulgent ... to abandon the discipline of excellence and be satiated with stuff ... worshipping the created instead of the Creator.

How does Jesus overcome these inner demons and temptations? By his connection with God, through God's people, through God's word, which I have compared to the global positioning system which tells you where you are in a given moment and says "Go there; don't go there ... but wherever you go I am with you."

The best means for resisting temptation, as Paul says in our text from Romans today is: to confess your faith, to remember your story with God, to say *no* to the wrong choice in the moment of testing: "That's not my story! That's not my mission! That's not who I am! That's not who I want to be! That's not what God would choose for me!" In other words, it is not just a matter of resisting a way which is damaging ... it is a matter of choosing *the way* which promises life.

Luke says the devil "departed from Jesus until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13), meaning Jesus would have to face these inner demons again from time to time, like when he dealt with his disciples, when he faced opposition, when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, and when he was dying on the cross. But he had already set his direction. He had claimed Israel's story, Israel's God, Israel's mission as his own. He remembered where he had been and that helped him remember where he was going.

There is a big difference between wandering in the wilderness and being led through the wilderness by God. Therefore, in this season of Lent, wherever you are in your spiritual journey, even if you aren't already in the desert, I invite you to spend forty days and forty nights in the wilderness led by Jesus. I invite you to join us in every opportunity for worship and service and mission in Jesus' name. I invite you to make spaces for solitary prayer and reflection and for seeking God. I invite you to turn inward to the barren landscape of your unexplored inner wilderness. In the process you will have to face yourself and your own demons and deal with them by God's help. If you're too busy to go there, you may need to ask yourself what you're running away from with all that frantic activity. If you're too afraid to go there, you may need to ask yourself what can be gained by this cowering spiritual paralysis. If you're too good to need to go there, you may need to ask yourself what makes you think you're better than Jesus, who felt his need to go there, to spend this time alone with God and with his own inner devil in spiritual contest. There are no good excuses for you not to take responsibility for your own soul formation and spiritual journey.

But if you will go there with us, into the wilderness of spiritual formation to meet God, and to withstand the test of your character, maybe you'll remember where you've been and discern where you need to go ... led by the grace of a God who promises life at the end of the journey of faith for all who will take the journey. Will you go there with us? Will you go there with Jesus? Let us pray.

Oh Lord, we would follow you wherever you lead us. But we are afraid to leave the familiar territory of our routines, or even our demons because our demons work for us and give us excuses for not doing better. Forgive us for settling with the shallow and mediocre when deeper and richer life awaits us in a closer walk with you. In this season of Lent, help us rise from the comfortable resting places of our spiritual boredom and move farther in our soul journey with Jesus. Amen.

