

Sermon: The stories and practice of wilderness

My sermon this morning is built upon two of the platforms that religion provides for your life: ‘story’ and ‘practice’. We’ll look at them one at a time, today’s Gospel reading informing our thinking about both. First, “story”...

Do you know(?) [Are you familiar with(?)] the verbal challenge, “What’s the story, here?” The phrase *itself* does not come up *nearly as often* as does the human experience of the phrase. In hospital, where I work, it is the question every *next patient* is not just presenting to their medical team to find out, it is at the root of all their concern and worry. I’ll personalize this: When I had a back injury over a decade ago, and I could barely move off the bed (the pain involved in doing so being like nothing I’d known before!), the thing I did not have was any story about being able to function with strength, and without pain, ever again. I had received a story about likely needing surgery, though with considerable risk of permanent impairment and pain. My day-by-day story was one of taking meds, doing exercises morning and evening, going to physiotherapy every few days, and seeing little improvement. I was not told, by anyone, that my badly bulging disc could be fully rectified, the narrowing in the spinal column could be effectively cushioned, everything in fact could be resolved by the physiotherapy and my exercising. I eventually lived that story for myself, but as a patient I would have loved to have heard it (known it was even possible!) early on. (“What is the story, here?”)

What we are given, in our Scriptures (the Bible), is a repository of stories covering off all the larger-themed human experiences ever faced by you or me (for, regarding the big themes, it is indeed true that “there is nothing new under the sun”). Humans who face long-term resource deprivation(?) – they are there in the sagas of biblical drought, plague or siege. Family system rivalry, manipulation, abuse, exploitation, scape-goating(?) – all of these are graphically played out in the lives of the patriarchs. Situations where dependency turns into slavery(?) – that’s the

story of Israel in Egypt. The hard human battle to escape enslavement (and think broadly here ... things like addiction and deep financial indebtedness as well as literal human enslavement)(?) – that’s the Exodus. The complex work involved in finding and exercising one’s true identity(?) – this is ‘wilderness sojourn’ (to which we shall return). The actual ‘taking on’ of true identity(?) – biblically, the occupation of the Promised Land. Crises of leadership; dealing with internal divisions and external opposition(?) – just read the complex histories of Israel and Judah. The human experience of being completely taken off one’s intended or expected course(?) – that is the Exile. The human experience of violence (from the side of conquest or that of defeat)(?) – there are too many biblical stories to list! The frustration of unfulfilled hopes(?) – this is the return from Exile. I could go on and on, but the point is that any experience we identify in our place and time can be held in a dialogue with biblical experience; what’s more, *there* we can find a full spectrum of responses *from* (i) railing out at God-and-the-universe *to* (ii) actually finding God in the midst of the whirlwind.

[By the way, *formally* carrying out this dialogue (between our experience and the biblical experience) is to do Theological Reflection. I name it here as a footnote ... *later* we will talk “head on” (and briefly) about ‘spiritual practice’.]

Today’s Gospel story is Matthew’s account of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. It follows right on the heels of Jesus’ baptism, which climaxed with God’s voice heard from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” For this son of a Nazarene carpenter, whose birthright honour is bottom-of-the-scale, ever possibly to be seen and accepted as deserving “Son of God” status, there cannot but be some major testing, *as well as* clear unassailable evidence of passing the tests. Hence, the Satan in the wilderness story.

But there’s another dynamic at play here, equally important. You heard, in today’s Epistle reading, how **Paul’s** ‘big story’ “*MAKING SENSE OF JESUS*” works by seeing Jesus as the second Adam. [In first Adam’s sin,

ALL sin says Paul (... for the father's honour and his family's honour are one and the same). Jesus, at the head of a new human family, *is righteousness*, and he brokers that righteousness, a gift from God, for all who believe in his resurrection. That is Paul's 'making sense' of Jesus.] **Matthew's** 'big story' goes differently: For Matthew, Jesus is not 'second Adam' but 'new Israel'. This is why, in Matthew's account, the infant Jesus is taken to Egypt and then returns to Palestine: he thereby retraces the pilgrimage of Israel of old. And this is why, in the first verse of today's Gospel story, Jesus is led into the desert by the Spirit for forty days, paralleling God's leading of Israel through the desert wilderness for forty years.

The difference between "old Israel" and "new" is the twist emphasized by Matthew: wherever Israel stumbled or failed before God, Jesus remains faithful and strong. Consider:

1. The people of Israel, not long in the wilderness, began to "murmur" and complain about their hunger. Surely they should have known that the God who delivered them from the Egyptians was also able to feed them! But, no!; they became so discouraged and worried that they just about caused a revolt.

Almost forty years later, near the end of their wilderness journey, Moses explained to the Israelites how their hunger in those first days was one of the means God used to test the will of the people to obey God. Deuteronomy 8:3 --

[God] humbled you and caused you to hunger ... that [God] might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Jesus, in the wilderness for forty days without food, does not fail. Faced with the temptation to turn stones into bread, he recognizes the truth which Israel had to have spelled out; in fact, he quotes the truth from Moses:

Man cannot live on bread alone, but needs every word that God speaks.

This is the first “twist” wherein Jesus comes out right, Israel ‘Oh! So wrong!’

Secondly,

2. The people of Israel, all during their wilderness wanderings, knew their goal to be the occupation of a land “flowing with milk and honey” promised them by God. The temptation was to short-cut. For example, with Moses up on Mount Sinai for what seemed an eternity, the people decided what they needed was a god who would move on with them. So, they fashioned a Baal out of gold and worshipped it.

Or, later on, in order to be successful and prosperous in their “promised land”, it seemed expedient to worship the agricultural gods already in place there (yes!, the Baals, and the Asherim). In the same speech previously referred to, Moses reminded the Israelites of their idolatry:

You shall fear the Lord your God, and [God alone] shall you worship.

Jesus, in his wilderness experience, has ahead of him a correct and good goal. Satan offered a short-cut: Jesus can have his kingship immediately if only he will bow down to Satan. Jesus triumphs where Israel failed, again responding with Moses’ instruction to Israel: “Worship the Lord your God and serve only [God]”.

The third twist:

3. When Israel is at last brought into their promised land, and established on Mount Zion, the Old Testament records their story as one of – time and again! – succumbing to the temptation of presuming on their sonship.

After all, they were God’s people. God promised the land was theirs. God said a descendant of David would always rule them. So why bother with all the demands of the covenant?

Their slackness put God to the test. Which Moses had told them not to do. In the same speech which produced the previous two citations, Moses reminded the Israelites of the time they almost stoned Moses to death because of a lack of drinking water. Their dissatisfaction and complaining were understood as a tempting of

Almighty God. Moses commands, in response, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

Jesus, too, was brought from the wilderness and set up upon Mount Zion – in fact, on the pinnacle of the Temple – and there tempted to presume on his Sonship. “Jump!”, said the tempter. Unlike Israel, Jesus refuses to presume on his sonship. He tells it as Moses told it: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”.

<Pause>

People, biblical wilderness stories – these two among them – are so important for us to know well, and to have readily available for the sake of our hearts and minds and souls. I use them often in my hospital work. For whenever a person (or family) is taken out of familiar surroundings, habits and relationships – finding themselves vulnerable, lost, and uncomfortably dependent – they are in wilderness. There are *many* reasons one finds oneself in wilderness: “Yes” hospitalization (**or** any other institutionalization); loss of purpose on account of some major life change (such as unemployment, or disability, or bereavement); ... we could likely generate a long list. Being in wilderness is usually as scary as it is unwanted. And, it is a normal human experience. Most people find themselves in the wilderness a number of times in their lifetime. Biblically (and here is where “religion as resource”, “religion as platform” shows up ‘in spades’), [Biblically,] the wilderness is nonetheless where people find or reconnect with their true identity; it is necessarily where humanity gets down to basic, honest and right relationship with God. Today’s Gospel vignette informs our wilderness stays by showing us possibilities: There, we can panic and scramble to fill the felt emptiness (as did Israel of old) **OR** wait, and listen for God whose Word is the bread we need. We can seek short-cuts to the end of wilderness, or we can stay focused on us *where-we-currently-belong* before God, whom alone we worship and serve. We can try to presume on our standing as people of faith (“Good Lord, get me out of here!”), or we can know not to put God to the test.

<Pause>

A final movement (and it shall be brief): Having focused on biblical narratives (such as today's Gospel reading) as foundational platforms *there to resource our living*, let us recognize our religion (our Christianity) hands us spiritual practices as well. Earlier, I mentioned Theological Refection as one of them. What I wish to highlight this morning is that the Christian year, itself, is a spiritual practice. When, in our lives, there are threatening movements into increasing darkness, it is good that we have practiced Advent every year of our life in Christ. Advent (and every other church season) is akin to the fire drill of the children's story (though the church seasons are much more broad and deep rehearsals): Advent prepares us to know about waiting for Light that is to come. When, in our lives, there are stretches where it seems God is not there, not at all involved, it is good that we have practiced Epiphany. The season reminds us about God breaking in (showing up!) on God's terms, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Today is the first Sunday of Lent (which season began with "ashes to ashes", Wednesday past). Lent is the season of practicing wilderness. It puts us into wilderness, a yearly rehearsal so that we can come to know the barrenness, the vulnerability, the fear and – yes! – the possibility of turning to and depending upon God ... so that, when we get to the full-blown wilderness seasons of our lives, we know the terrain, the pitfalls and the possibilities. All of it in God's hands. Amen.