

Holy Covenant Sermon 21st Feb 2010
Luke 4, 1 – 15

What does the wilderness look like? I remember visiting the desert of Central Australia after rain. On the background of bright orange sand, flowers bloomed – Sturt desert peas dressed in striking red and black, purple heath, yellow and orange lines of flowers. There were animal tracks zigzagging through the sand. At night as we camped in swags under the stars we watched satellites circle the earth.

At Christmas in the Snowy mountains wilderness, I walked with thousands of others, in pilgrimage to the top of Mt Kosciuszko: I walked on a raised platform to protect the environment. There were lots of flowers here too, and the beginnings of mountain streams. Eagles soared overhead.

What does the wilderness look like?
I visited someone recovering from a stroke, who then had a bad fall. This person was fearful, dependent, determined; each step to recovery, tiny, and painful.

My boyfriend was killed in a car accident when I was 19. The world was bleak shades of grey. I sat by the lake weeping my private tears while trying to study at Uni. I visited a friend in Sydney seeking support — but she hadn't heard and I ended up comforting her. The blackness, the tears dragged on, grief unresolved for 20 years, though life continued, and grief only revisited occasionally.

A relationship ends after a bitter wrangle. There is guilt and recrimination, anger and sadness all mixed together, and ongoing custody battles.

There is aging, loss of fertility, loss of memory, aching joints, stiffness disappearing as younger, beautiful people take the stand.

Major surgery - a hysterectomy for me. For some ... mental illness , depression, dropping out, voices, mania ... Isolation.

What does your wilderness look like?

I take a day out, and drive to Tidbinbilla, alone. I walk the lyrebird track. The air is crisp. I eat my packed lunch at a table. I write in my journal, then I walk the sanctuary path, watching water birds play.

I sit in the botanic gardens, water dragons looking at me hopeful from my feet. Rosellas squawking ... I am resting.

The wilderness journey — exotic adventures, time out, or just hard work?
We heard earlier from Luke.

The story came after Jesus baptism, where Jesus is named 'God's beloved Son' and then the genealogy where Jesus is called 'the Son (as was thought) of Joseph', and then recalls Jesus' lineage to Adam 'Son of god' (3: 23, 35).

Who Jesus is in relationship with God is part of the temptation – two of which begin with the explicit challenge: "If you are the Son of God...." (Seasons of the Spirit congregational Life, Lent, Easter p 32, 2010).

Jesus is not alone in the wilderness — so who and what serve as his companions?.

There is a Spirit who leads Jesus in the wilderness. There is hunger — a very human companion.

There is diabolos — a greek word meaning "accuser", often translated as 'Devil'.

Or 'tempter' – who tests Jesus in the midst of need.

There is Scripture. The tempter uses scripture — from Psalm 91: and Jesus in turn replies from scripture — all from Deuteronomy. Finally, there is God, named and trusted in Jesus' responses.

Jesus answers each of the temptations with quotes from Deuteronomy, one of the primary narratives of Israel's wilderness traditions.

Deuteronomy combines telling about the final part of the exodus from Egypt with extensive teachings of what it means to be in covenant relationship with god.

It recalls the time when the Israelites were poised to enter the land of Promise, and speaks of what it means to be God's covenant people.

Underpinning these traditions is that the 40 years in the wilderness resulted from peoples lack of trust in god.

Jesus' wilderness time in contrast, is a journey of trust. Where does Jesus wilderness lead him?.

In Luke's telling, from here Jesus moves into public ministry. The 'Tempter' waits for an 'opportune time' which comes during Jesus' trial and suffering. For Luke, this wilderness time hints at where we are going. The last Temptation takes place at the temple ... that's the place where Luke's telling ends, where the Disciples 'were continually in the Temple blessing God' (Luke 24 – 53).

Where do you place yourself?. Wherever you are, it is an opportunity for reassessment. Jesus was lead by the spirit into the wilderness. He did not travel alone. He took his relationship to the divine spirit, go-between. Not that this made it easy, mind you, but it was to that relationship he clung.

In that Desert, that wilderness, he encountered another strange companion – 'the devil', real or imagined?, internal or external?, 'the devil' real enough to him — a presence, a force, a desire to be reckoned with. (Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life, Lent, Easter p 32, 2010).

Who am I?

Where have I come from?

What is my purpose?

These are the questions to be grappled with.

Of course he quoted scripture, he was steeped in it, and that was the way of theological and philosophical discussion. His adversary quoted back, of course. That is the way of dialogue. It is tempting to be who I am not.

For Jesus to be something other than fully human —
Food — he was starving — miracle worker was attractive,
A high mountain — all powerful omnipotent ruler — enticing,
To be caught when falling — protected from pain — Yes!
Very real Temptations — but these were not his calling. They are not our calling — we too are human.

What distracts us from who we are? —

Power?,

Simplistic relationship?,

Simple path?.

Joyce Rupp writes:

(Joyce Rupp 'Gods enduring presence', John Garrett publishing 2008).

Jesus did not decide on his own to go into the desert. He was led by the Spirit. Jesus would probably not have chosen to go there any more than any of us would choose to enter into a time of extended struggle. Yet in those challenging forty days Jesus experienced his inner strength and found a clear direction for his future ministry. Out of that empty and hostile sojourn, Jesus came forth with "the power of the Spirit" in him (Luke 4: 14). I can't imagine any of us liking our own deserts, the parts of our life we want to get rid of as fast as we can: anything that snatches us away from a contented life. We tend to think our deserts are bad places, But could it be the spirit leads us there to know ourselves better? Could it be that our deserts are the very place where we meet our spiritual power, where our faith is strengthened and the assurance is given that we can, as Jesus did, deliberately choose for good in the face of temptation and conflict?.

It seems a young man — John the Dwarf — prayed to God to remove all his passions. He believed that if he were unmoved by difficulties, without feeling towards those who attacked him, and unable to be swayed by devils, he would be alive to God. So, John the Dwarf asked God to take away his feelings. He wanted to live without emotions.

Being gracious, god answered John's prayer and made him 'impassable'. By an act of God, John the Dwarf ceased to feel — anything. He became passionless. Then in his new condition, John the Dwarf went to see some older men in the desert community. Standing before them he boasted of being without any struggle, any anxiety, or temptation. "I am completely at peace", he said. "God has removed me from all temptations. Nothing moves me."

"Well", said these wise old companions, "you had better hurry back to your cell. Go and pray to command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battle." Now, this was not what John the Dwarf had expected

from these trusted companions. Still, he respected these men, so he obeyed. He returned to his desert hut and asked god for something to struggle against, to test him.

God heard his prayer and set many temptations before John. However, though the temptations came hard and fast, John the Dwarf never again asked for these strange companions to be removed. Though evil surrounded him and constantly tried him, he had been enlightened by the counsel of wiser companions. Now, John the Dwarf simply prayed, "Give me strength to get through".

This is a spiritual truth. Good and necessary are wise companions to guide us toward prayer: good, too, are the many strange companions that mature our faith through testing. These strange companions prove and improve us. Struggle hardens spiritual muscles. This was true for Jesus in the wilderness beyond the Jordan. This was true for John the Dwarf in the deserts of Egypt. And, this is true for us today.

We are conditioned for the work of God through struggle. And, that strangest of all companions, the devil, is part of our conditioning. To be ready for the work ahead, Jesus needed to know three things.

Jesus had to know from whence he came.

Jesus had to know the food which would sustain him.

And Jesus had to know his purpose.

Jesus' struggle in the wilderness against Satan forced Jesus to acknowledge his past, his present, and his future as belonging entirely to God.

Good and wise companions assist us in our journey. Their words comfort and heal and bind up our wounds when life inflicts real hurt. But the "Devils" of the desert – the situations and people who challenge – these strange companions can test whether or not we know the ultimate truth about our life. Only in the shadows of the wilderness, with the wind howling and the wolves nipping near, will it become clear:

We live from God,

We live on God,

We live for God.