

"THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE"

Part II

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God...'"

(Matthew 4: 1 - 3)

INTRODUCTION

And so we come to the second part of a two-part sermon, and I'm worried. For it seems that in our time, the sequel is never quite as good as the original. You know what I mean. Jaws II was not as good as Jaws I. Godfather I was much better than Godfather II. And so it goes...

As we take another look at the wilderness experience of Jesus, we find that it parallels our life situations in certain ways, and I would suggest three things that were probably happening to Jesus in the wilderness, three things that may also be happening to us, as we walk through the wilderness. And remember this, too, one does not have to travel to Palestine to be in the wilderness. One can be in the wilderness standing in the middle of Times Square in this city.

WHO AM I

First, I believe that sooner or later each of us has to answer the question, "Who am I?". This was the basic issue Jesus was dealing with in His struggle there in the wilderness of Judea. And none of us really knows where he's going in life until he has answered it. Who am I?

Now one of the problems we all face is that there are usually a good many people around us who would like to tell us who we are. Sometimes parents do it for their children. Television producers do it for television watchers. Your friends, your family, your wife or husband - all are engaged in shaping their expectations of you and urging you and pressing you to fit into the mould.

The people writing in the field of Transactional Analysis have helped to remind us how much we live out those scripts which others have written for us. We may think we're responding to people and events when we are merely living out scenarios which have been written for us by people a long time back. And when we do this, we're living out someone else's view of who we are rather than our own.

Now - it's one thing to know that we're responding to our past, but quite another thing to break from it and live as your own person in the present.

Bernard Berkowitz reports that a patient of his on discovering he'd been living someone else's script and needed to change once burst out rather indignantly, "But that would mean that I've wasted the first 40 years of my life!" Berkowitz goes on to write:

"Some people would prefer to go on making the same mistake for another 40 years that admit it and cut their loses. People are very stubborn. Sometimes they secretly believe that if they keep on long enough with their preconceived behavior they'll make it right."

Many of us do not want to admit we've been wrong or risk a change. It's quite possible for people to go through life never having to answer this basic question "Who am I" - or answering it by accepting someone else's answer.

I believe that for every one of us - at some point along the way - there comes that moment when we are thrust headlong into answering it, crucial moments when it comes to a head. I think we have to answer it when we choose a vocation. (If my work is to fulfill me, how do I know what to do unless I know who I am). I think we need to answer this question before we marry, assuming we choose to. (If I am to give myself to the one I profess to love, what self do I have to give?)

The question needs to be answered on the basis of present reality - not who was I before, but who am I now. This is the struggle of Jesus in the wilderness. Suppose He had answered the question by saying, "I'm a carpenter. I have a good life here in Nazareth. I make a good living. I don't want to rock any boats. I have family responsibilities. Sure, there are a lot of things to be done, but they're out of my line".

But He didn't make that answer. He did not listen to the voices of what He had been in the past, nor the expectations of friends and family. He listened to what God was asking of Him and what it would mean for Him in the future. And so it is with us. "Who am I?"

ALONE The second point to touch on is that there are some questions in life which can only be answered alone.

This may threaten us for some are afraid of being alone. "I take my radio to bed with me so I won't have to think" says the teenager and in so doing expresses an attitude not at all limited to her generation. Think for a moment of the way we keep ourselves overprogrammed and overscheduled so that there is always something outside ourselves demanding our time.

And what is it that makes us afraid of times "alone"? Why do we avoid them? Is it because when we're alone, we have to live with the people we really are and not the people we present to the world all day long? Without pressure from the outside, all kinds of things that we've pushed down in the press of things rise to confront us.

"Why Am I Afraid to Tell you Who I Am" is the title of a paper back that appeared on book shelves recently, and the answer is "because I'm afraid that if I tell you, you won't like it and that is all I have to offer". All of us have those areas where we cover-up and camouflage because we are not comfortable with ourselves. If we don't like ourselves, then we can be threatened when we're alone with ourselves.

So, most of us keep running...and running. In our activist culture, we can often fail to ~~often~~ find ourselves like the person who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions, unless we have centered down on some kind of inner direction that makes sense for us. And so I say to all of you "work-aholics" out there...those great decisions of life should not be trusted to a time when you're pressured, harrassed and surrounded by distractions of daily living. Each of us needs a time away to reflect, to evaluate, to decide, to look to the future.

If an important business matter can cause a person to do lonely "soul-searching", how much more is required of those of us who would know the deeper meaning and direction of our lives? When Jesus went into the wilderness, it was for the purpose of being alone with Himself and God - there to face the crucial questions of His ministry.

A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

It was in that wilderness experience that Jesus sought a sense of direction for His life which was a result of finding out "who He was" - and third and just as important, perhaps even more important, it was there He accepted responsibility for where He went from there.

Which is perhaps another way of saying that He "internalized" God's demands upon Himself, and they became His own demands upon Himself. It was this as much as anything that would enable Him to say again and again in His teaching, "It has been said of old...but I say unto you". He was not totally breaking with the authority of the past, but He was willing to accept this responsibility for being His own authority for teaching a new point of view. And this would startle the people of His time because He had no formal theological education as such, yet He had this internal authority from having lived with the truth and made it His own.

We have much to learn from Jesus in this regard. I think that most of us want to make other people responsible for what we do. We blame it on others - parents, a wife or husband, the boss, the teacher, yes - the minister. It reminds me of a lecture given by a professor in seminary on "The Minister As the Pin Cushion". People...unable to accept responsibility for themselves, their failures and frustrations, like to stick pins into others.

We like to make others responsible for what we do. One think of the parents who quote Dr. Spock as if he had the sole right to decide for them how they will rear their children, or the teacher who holds something to be true simply because this person or that person said it. But I also think of Martin Luther who said,

"It is neither wise nor honest for a man to go against his own conscience."

I suggest to you that somewhere in your life, in my life, there ought to come that moment when we say, "I am responsible for myself. I accept for myself the responsibility for my life and what I am making of it." And to that degree to which we can do this we become mature, effective people. And to the degree that we want others to do this for us we become weak, dependent and limited persons.

ILLUSTRATION

Maggie Savoy was Woman's Editor of the Los Angeles Times until a couple of years ago. She died of cancer of the esophagus. It was - in her own words - the second time around because in the mid sixties she had undergone surgery in her abdominal region and recovered for five years before it struck again.

She left behind piles of "raw notes" which she had hoped to make into a book to help other people face the ordeal she was going through. She wrote:

"I've learned a lot...practically all of it the hard way.. about life and living. I've learned a lot about dying.

I was lucky I faced my own death, for I have lived more, loved more, accomplished more, been more in these last 5½ years than in all the other years put together.

"Like the fact of cancer, I have learned another fact. I may not have the choice over what kills me, but I do have a choice over what I kill. I have the power to shape, to make, to spend, to use every single hour still remaining on the books. And I have the power to shape, to make and to build love.

These were the only things I owned, the only ME there was. I won't say it came all at once. I don't say it stayed every time it came. I don't say I didn't hate myself other nights, had other deep rages, other I'm crying for myself excesses.

I do say it as a truth and as a fact. And it profoundly changed our lives. Slowly, like a left-handed kid learned to write...I learned by practice. One has the power over the quality of one's life. That is all."

That is all, but - it is also almost everything. For, if you have power over the quality of your life, then nothing can ultimately defeat you. The old spiritual is still correct:

"You must go and stand your trial.
You have to stand it by yourself.
Oh, nobody else can stand it for you.
You have to stand it by yourself."

CONCLUSION Jesus, Our Lord and Saviour, walked that path. Yes, He took His turn in the wildrness. And there, as He struggled with the temptation to be LESS than He could be, He shaped the quality of His life. In that experience, He found that God was real and that a personal relationship with Him was possible. In a sense, He was alone, but in another sense He discovered He found He was not alone. It was there, as He opened His life to God that He found out who He was and what the direction of His life would be.

Weeks later, He came through that experience, that time of great testing,... and because of this, we can live with hope that you and I can do the same.

PRAYER There are those times in life, O God, when we find ourselves in the wilderness of doubt, of temptation, of uncertainty, of loneliness. Times when we are tempted to do the right thing for the wrong reason. Times when we are tempted to be less than the best we know we can be. Be real to us, our Father, in such moments.

May those experiences be for us times of great growth, of new insight, of high decision that we may know who we are and what Your will for us is. Remembering Jesus, in whom we find life's highest hopes, and its deepest meaning - in His name and spirit we pray.

Amen