

## "THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE"

### Part II

"The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him"

INTRODUCTION As we think about the wilderness experience of Jesus again today, we find that it parallels our life situations in certain ways, and I would like to suggest three things about what was happening to Jesus as He took His turn in the wilderness, three things that may also be happening to us...as we walk through the wilderness. First,

WHO AM I I believe that sooner or later each of us has to answer the question, "Who am I?" This was the basic issue that 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?

One of the problems we all face is that there are usually a good many people around who would like to tell us who we are. Sometimes parents do it for their children. Television hucksters do it for the 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 of 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 are 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. Most of us do not want to admit that we have been wrong or try to change. 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 forty years of my life!" Berkowitz goes on to write,

"Some people would prefer to go on making the same mistake for another forty years than 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".

I think it's quite possible for people to go through life never having to answer this question "Who am I?" or answering it by accepting someone else's answer.

But, 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 ought to answer this question before we marry. (If I am to give myself to the one I love, what self do I have to give?) Again, I think you have

to answer this question if you are to be a good parent. (If you are to provide a model for your children, you must be able to communicate to them who you are and why you make the choices and choose the values you do.)

The question needs to be asked 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 a bit 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. He listened to what God was asking of Him now and what it would mean for Him in the future. And so it is with us. "Who am I?"

ALONE The second point I wish to make 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 his 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. We keep the TV running "for company", but perhaps also for distraction....anything to keep from feeling that we're alone.

And what is it that makes us so 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 rather than the masks which we have presented to the world all day long? Without pressure from outside ourselves to engage our attention, all kinds of things that we have pushed down in the press of things rise to confront us.

"Why I Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?" is the title of an interesting paper back, and the answer to that unusual question is "Because I am afraid that if I tell you, you won't like it and that is all I have to offer". Doesn't that strike home to where you live? 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 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. Those great decisions of life should not be trusted to a time when you are 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.

Norman Cousins wrote of the agonizing process by which he reached the decision to sell the Saturday Review to the McCall Publishing organization. He took a trip to far places in connection with his work to get out of the normal routine, and familiar sights and sounds of his own home, in order to think through the decision before it was irrevocable. "By the end of the trip" he wrote, "I could qualify as an expert in the deep silences of night in far flung places like London, Karachi, Bombay, New Delhi and Indonesia. I came by that intimate knowledge honestly....staying awake and thinking about the Saturday Review - its past, and its future, its staff and its readers."

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

I don't know where the wilderness is for you, but I believe that every one of us at some time or another in life should go there and ask what his life is all about. Lent is a good time to do this, but it can be done any time during the year.

A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY It was in that wilderness experience that Jesus sought a sense of direction, a sense of who He was, and third and perhaps most important of all, 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 Him, 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 which comes from having lived with truth and having made it His own.

We have a great deal to learn from Jesus in this respect. I think that most of us want to make other people responsible for what we do. I 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. I think of the teacher who holds something to be true simply because this person or that person said it. But I also think of Martin Luther saying, "It is neither wise nor honest for a man to go against his own conscience".

And then I think of where most of us are....timid about our own beliefs, uncertain about what we stand for and what we ought to be against. And I suggest to you that somewhere in your life there ought to come that moment when you say, "I am responsible for myself. I accept for myself the responsibility for my life and what I am making of it". And to the degree to which we can do this we become mature and effective persons. To the degree that we want others to do this for us we become 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 1964 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 passing through. I thought of some of these paragraphs recently as one of our own members faces a similar situation. insights..

"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 ~~places~~ in these last

5 $\frac{1}{2}$  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 had the power to shape, make, spend, use every single hour still remaining on the books. And I had the power to shape, make and build love.

These were the only things I owned, the only ME there was. I won't say that 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 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 walked that path. Yes, He took his turn in the wilderness. 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. In a sense, He was alone, but in another 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.

He came through that experience - and because of this, we can live with hope that you and I can do as well.

PRAYER There are times in life, O God, when we find ourselves in the wilderness of doubt, of temptation, of uncertainty, of loneliness. Be real to us at such times, O God. May those experiences be for us times of growth, of insight, of decision that we may know who we are and what thy will for us is. Remembering Jesus, we ask this in His name.