

Testing in the Wilderness

Sunday 1st March 2020

Readings: Psalm 32, Genesis 2:15-17 & 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11, Romans 5:12-19

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In January of 2017 a woman by the name of Shelley Crooks was found in West Coast bushland after being missing for six weeks. For those of you who know the NZ bush this was really quite something. Bear Grills rates the NZ bush as one of the most dangerous places in the world to get lost. There are only a few plants that can be eaten in the NZ bush without significant cooking and almost all of these are slightly or greatly toxic. There are only a few small animals around as a real source of protein. In summer water sources can be a major issue. Being lost in the wilderness is scary to say the least, not just on the physical front but on the spiritual and mental one as well. We are not designed to be completely alone. God created us to interact, to be with others, to encourage and be encouraged, to challenge and be challenged, to love and be loved. Complete isolation is not normal though we all know of individuals who try to be so. Survival experts say that, more often than not, it is the mental, the spiritual, that lets people down and they die from the consequences of it long before the body necessarily must perish. This is supported by the fact that children and young people lost in similar circumstances, who theoretically are even more vulnerable, survive. Shelley Crooks, with faith and a positive attitude, survived by catching eels and possums and eating them and limiting her movement around to save energy. Fortunately, in the West Coast bush, water is not such an issue. Shelley was rescued when another trapper happened by and got help.

The wilderness, whatever form it takes, has always been seen as a place of challenge. In Biblical times the vast wildernesses of the deserts were such places. Many sect groups such as the Jewish Essenes at Qumran, the writers of the Dead Sea scrolls, built great communities away from the world, which they saw as corrupted and polluted. Ascetics regularly, for days or even for years, went in lived in the hundreds of caves and holes in cliffs in Israel and beyond. The desert was seen as a cleansing, holy, purifying place. Unsurprisingly, it is from the desert that John the Baptist started his public ministry, symbolically calling people out of the world to the desert to be purified and made ready for the coming of the Messiah and God's Kingdom.

Of course, there are many famous encounters in the wilderness or desert areas in the Scriptures. Moses meets God at the burning bush. The Hebrew people meet God at Mt Sinai and so forth. Today we focus on Jesus' testing in the wilderness following His baptism.

We might preface this discussion by observing a reality often overlooked in popular Christianity: being a Christian has times of real difficulty and struggle, not just because of ourselves or the world but because the Devil is the very real enemy of God and acts to deliberately take Christians out of the battle. Our spiritual wilderness experiences are a vitally important part of our growth in faith. In the Old Testament Book of Job, Satan is given licence to test Job and his faith which he does in increasing degree as God permits it. In Daniel 10:13 demonic opposition stopped help from getting to Daniel for three weeks. The apostle Peter is helpful for us in this setting because he understood all too well the reality of the battle. Peter wrote, "**Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.**" (1 Peter 5:8-9). Since Adam and Eve we have had the knowledge of good and evil and the ability to choose our path. To choose evil, deliberately or by not doing what we should, is evil, is sin, is rebellion against the way of God. We can dress it up however we like, we are experts at self-justification, but in our heart we know when we have fallen short of the mark. Jesus, like us in all things yet without sin, also had to face the challenges the devil put before Him time and again. Jesus was consciously aware of this. When the apostle Peter, for example, tried to dissuade Jesus from going up to Jerusalem Jesus responded, not to Peter as such, but with "**Get behind me Satan.**" (Matt 16:23.) Jesus was acutely aware when He was under attack and where it was coming from. In the narrative of the desert temptations we

have the clearest articulation of some of the key ways that Satan can attack us and Jesus' lesson on how to deal with it.

We might start by noting three things. Firstly, testing came after a time of blessing. Jesus had recently been baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit. He had heard the voice of God proclaiming, not only that Jesus was His Son but also that God was well pleased with Him. What normal child doesn't love to hear the heartfelt praises of their parents? Praise and encouragement build us up and give us confidence and courage to go out and face the world, to try new things, to learn and grow. Never underestimate what your word or act of encouragement can do for people. Jesus would have been in a very positive place after His baptism and then got a dose of the stark reality of the world. We note that Matthew tells us (Matt 4:1) that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. We might give this some thought. The Spirit led Jesus? God doesn't tempt us, but He does test us, does allow us to be tempted. Why? We need to be tested, tried, developed, grown and exercised in faith for faith to be made real in us. If not, it is all in our heads. Remember even Jesus, according to Hebrews 5:9, **"Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."** Note Jesus was *made perfect* by His suffering. The apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians observes, in 2 Cor 12:9, said that the Lord told him, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."** God's power is made perfect in our weakness so that we might not boast, so we know the real source of our strength. From that point of encouragement and strength Jesus was then taken to a place of testing. When we are strong, we are also vulnerable. We can get too big headed, too sure of ourselves, too over-confident and forget our need of God. Testing keeps our focus sure. So, testing regularly comes after blessing but it may come out of the blue and come take many forms – financial, sexual, honesty, pride the list is endless.

Secondly, testing came in the wilderness. We are vulnerable when we are alone. When we don't have others to support and encourage us. So many, many people are alone today it is crazy. I remember years ago Lorriane, myself and friend Anne all ran in the Round the Bays. We did it every year until it got changed to Sundays. This particular year I raced off then stopped to wait for the girls but missed them. Though I looked and looked I couldn't find them. I felt lost and alone in a crowd of thousands. I probably did the distance twice before going home to find them. Yet many people are very, very lonely, isolated, cut off yet they live in families, in communities, even in churches. They are alone in the crowd. For whatever reason or reasons, they have cut themselves off from what can be a heartless society. This creates a massive vulnerability and risk. It opens up the door for Satan to do his worst. And he does. Regularly. The statistics prove it. Jesus went into the wilderness, choosing to be obedient, because He knew that coming through this time would make Him stronger and equipped to do the real work God had for His life. I believe, as Martin Luther did, that this dark night of the soul is not uncommon in the lives of committed followers. It so afflicted Martin Luther that his melancholy threatened to destroy him. No ordinary fit of depression but a depression linked to a crisis of faith, a crisis that comes when one senses the absence of God or gives rise to a feeling of abandonment by Him. Jesus was alone when He was tested. He had to learn to stand on His own two feet. This would be critical later in life and particularly at Gethsemane. Which way would He go, do we go? The way of easy submission, of giving up? Or do we show real character and wrestle through keeping as much of our faith and integrity in tack as we can, to work through to what God has for us?

Thirdly, testing came in a time of physical vulnerability. We all know that Jesus was hungry. Forty days, forty days and nights, however you look at it, Jesus had a long time without food though He would have had water or wine to drink. When He was at His physical weakest Satan came to Him to attack. How often have we been susceptible to the devil's machinations when

we have been over-tired, over-worked, lacking in sleep, exercise, proper food or nourishment? Or struck by illness, disease or injury, sorrow, failure or change?

With all of these vulnerabilities: following a time of blessing, being in the wilderness, alone and physically diminished Jesus faces off with Satan. How would you go?

Let us turn then to the temptations: each addresses a different facet of human nature and weakness. The first was about self-identity and self-serving. Satan told Jesus to command the stones to become bread if He is the Son of Man. Jesus knew who He was. He did not need the constant affirmation of others. He didn't feel the need to prove Himself. He was confident in who He was. Most critically He had the Father's voice in His head saying, "**Here is my Son with whom I am well pleased**". Jesus didn't need anyone else's affirmation. Nor was He going to let His own physical desire overwhelm what is right. So, He was hungry. There are lots of forms of physical desire, lusts of the flesh. The temptation was there but He was not going to respond to it. Temptation is ever before us, but we don't have to buy into it. That's a choice. A choice we make. Jesus was more interested in keeping His Father's good favour and, from Scripture, this is where Jesus directs Satan. '**Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.**' My physical need and passions are transitory and will pass but the things of God, the Word of God, God's approval, is eternal. That's what I want to feed on. Don't offer me second best. As Moses and the people had been led into the desert and had to trust that God would provide when they were hungry and thirsty, so too Jesus would rely on God to provide what was necessary at the right time. Jesus would not take things into His own hands but would wait on the Father's time and instruction.

Satan then responds to this trust in God by tempting Jesus to test God. Just how much can He trust God? Is God reliable? Is Jesus faith well directed? Psalm 91 directs us to trust God because He cares for us. But does He? The Temple is, throughout most of the Old Testament, regarded as the place where God resides. Here is Jesus, no longer in the wilderness but standing on the peak, the highest point, of the Temple. It is not far for God to stretch out His hand to save Him from falling is it if He resides in the Temple? One notes the irony of course in the fact that Lucifer is a fallen angel. Jesus' response is one of faith. We read that at Massah, in the desert, in Exodus 17, Moses and the Israelites had put the Lord to the test. Due to the Hebrews insistent clamouring for water, in frustration, Moses had struck the rock twice that God had commanded him to strike once to bring forth water. As a consequence of this disobedience Moses didn't get to enter the Promised Land at that time himself. He does of course later at Jesus Transfiguration as we mentioned last week. Jesus wasn't going to make the same mistake as Moses. Neither was He going to excite Jewish Messianic expectations by suddenly jumping off the Temple and landing safely on the ground in front of the worshipping Hebrew crowds. Satan's attempt to thwart God's mission was not going to be so easily achieved. No, Jesus would not put the Lord to the test, nor would He duplicate Satan's error or try to manipulate God's plan. We serve God. It is foolishness to take that attitude and approach in life that God is there to serve us.

Satan's final gambit then was actually a sign of desperation: to offer what he was unable to offer, to offer Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. How easily Jesus must have seen through this one. At the very least Jesus would have been aware of the role and destiny of the Messiah and that, through obedience, all that authority would become His anyway, without being subservient to the devil. Let alone worship him. Jesus blunt response is essentially: "**Get lost. I serve God alone.**"

Jesus had overcome Satan for the time being. He came through His wilderness experience, drained, tired but victorious, strengthened in His faith and determination, clear in His thinking. This is what we need to achieve through our wilderness experiences. We do not want to get lost there or fade away but be strengthened and lean closer into God so that we become stronger in faith – not in our own strength but in His.

As the apostle James will later write, **“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”** (James 4:7) Of course the devil does not flee forever but bides his time until the next moment of perceived weakness. Still roaring, still thrashing around, still looking for chinks in the armour, the devil doesn't give up. He will come back multiple times and attack Jesus' motivation, His action, His faith but having learned and been tested Jesus never gives in. He does ask the disciples to pray for Him, He knows His need for community support no matter how poor it might be. He is not alone. God is there for Him, others are there for Him. We too can walk in this strength, this faith, as the apostle John states, **“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”**

So when you face wilderness experiences do not be afraid of them. Do not fear them. Embrace them as learning times that make you faith truly real. See what God has for you, what God is teaching you about yourself and about Himself. See what new insight and resource He will give you so that your faith grows and is strengthened. And see how He exposes your weaknesses and vulnerabilities that need to be handed over to Him so that you might walk in His strength and not your own. As you do this you will hear that voice echoing, as Jesus did, this is my child with whom I am well pleased. Even though when we are in the midst of the wilderness it is hard to understand, God cleanses us and purifies us so that we can serve and fully know the depth of His love for us. I pray your wilderness experience will lead you to greater depth and joy in the Lord.

Amen