

The Wilderness, I

When God freed the Hebrews from the slavery of Egypt, the first thing He did was to send them into the wilderness. There was a road from the Red Sea to the Holy Land, which would have taken two weeks to trek. But instead, 40 years in the wilderness was the will of the Almighty.

When St. Elias fled Jezebel, he was led into the wilderness. When St. John the Baptist took the Nazarite vow at age eight and kept it perfectly which is a miracle in itself – he immediately went into the wilderness and lived there to his dying day, which is another miracle that an eight-year-old could do such a thing. When St. Paul received the sacraments after his violent persecution of the Church, he took the Nazarite vow and went into the wilderness for three years. Our Blessed Lord often went into the wilderness, especially before He began to preach to the Gentiles. There are many, many more examples of this through the history of salvation. Why does God want people to go into the wilderness? This question has been on my mind during and since I completed a long backpacking expedition in the most isolated wilderness country I've ever seen or experienced.

To answer this, first take a look at how we live for a moment. We live in houses. This means we control the temperature, we control the light, we control the sound, we control the décor, sound, everything though within limits. We have indoor plumbing and have control over the call to nature. We leave the house to get in a car which is controlled by us. If we go to work in an office, it's the same – within limits. Even the plants and trees around our houses are controlled by us. We are in charge. What is the result of all this control – of this power we exercise over our surroundings? I suggest it is pride. All this power and control is a seedbed for pride to grow and flourish.

But the wilderness is different. It doesn't look like what we intend, it looks like what God intended. The temperature is what God intends. Same with the smell, the light, the sounds...everything is according to what God intends it to be. And this is humbling, almost the direct opposite of what we normally experience. To enter the wilderness is to lose control for a while, like entering into someone else's house to live for a time.

Now lest you think I'm advocating for outhouses and kerosene lamps, please don't think that. It would not be at all practical or even possible for that matter. The wilderness is beautiful, yes, and can be a seedbed for humility, but it is exceedingly harsh. There is saying which is used by the instructors of the expedition I was on which is "The mountains don't care." The wilderness does not care about us. So all the strange new-agey love of nature and even the worship of nature grinds to a halt with the harshness of the wilderness. It is tough to live in it, and it is exceedingly unforgiving.

Which is another reason God sends His disciples to the wilderness – to experience His forgiveness as opposed to the unforgiveness of nature.

One of the things we did then on the expedition with Wyoming Catholic College was all night adoration of the Holy Eucharist. Under a tent fly, I placed a Host in a pyx after Mass in the late afternoon, mounted it on a stump with a white veil, and one of the lads very reverently took his headlamp and turned on the red option and placed it before the Blessed Sacrament. Each man took a three hour shift. It got to 29 degrees that night, so whoever got off shift put more wood on the fire so the next guy could thaw out before getting back into the sleeping bag. and the following day, each of us took a position away from the others and remained in solitude without leaving that spot for a day of prayer, utter silence, reflection (and some sleep too!) and spiritual reading, plus a close observance of the wilderness, observing plants, insects, water, the rocks and trees; everything made by God, and not really seeing or hearing anything made by man. The experience compelled one to look at things directly painted and formed by God.

The result of this was a sense of closeness to God, a contact with Him not normally experienced. And the result of that is of course activity from hell. The moment anyone experiences even a slight move towards God, and responds favorably to it, then Satan immediately takes notice of it. In C. S. Lewis' book The Screwtape Letters, this is described quite well, where the junior demons are instructed to do something about this inclination to God without delay. For Screwtape – an assistant of the devil – God is of course the Enemy – "He must be thwarted at every move!" The Enemy acts quickly lest the subject be pulled away even slightly from damnation. So it was not a surprise to me to be tempted mightily for hour after hour days on end afterwards, clear up to the drive back here. The lads on the expedition I dare say experienced the same thing.

Now you might be saying to yourselves at this point, "Is he suggesting we go into some wilderness and spend a day alone with God" Well, yes, I am suggesting that. Very much so. Besides it strikes me that none of us, none who believe in God can fully avoid the experience of a wilderness anyway. It is a path that everyone must travel, since our Lord travelled it, and *the servant is not greater than the master*.

The path might not be in the Teton wilderness, but ask anyone who is depressed, and they will tell you the depression feels like a wilderness. Ask anyone who is experiencing a crisis of faith due to one or a host of problems and scandals in Holy Mother Church, and they will tell you it feels like being alone in a wilderness. The list is long of the things in this world that make you feel like you are in a wilderness – including the things we do to ourselves. The wilderness is desolate, and without comfort.

Yet the spiritual dryness which St. David experienced was not seen by him as punishment. God does not use the wilderness to punish, but to test, which is very different. In Psalm 138 David writes *Prove me, O God, and know my heart: examine me, and know my paths*. That is the great advantage of the wilderness – to be tested – to discover who we are and who He is. We are not sent into the wilderness to be punished, but rather it is for our faith to be strengthened. And mind you this strengthening comes with little or no feedback, and rarely with emotional consolation, but a strengthening none the less.

To deliberately enter into the wilderness is not to retreat into some spiritual or emotional cave like a recluse who cuts himself off from all human contact out of disgust for his fellow man. That is simply inhumane and foolish. No, the purpose is not to cut off contact, but to strengthen it. The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich contemplated the grievous temptations she was experiencing in her wilderness, and wondered why God had allowed such trials to come her way. Ultimately she came to the conclusion that the only way to answer the terrible questions of justice was by intimacy with Christ. That is the greatest purpose of all for going into the wilderness – to reach by hard work a place of greater intimacy with God.