

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Breaking Free”

Luke 4: 1-13

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Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree... the story of Jesus' ministry begins with baptism and blessing and it moves quickly into the desert... and into temptation.

One minute, Jesus is standing in the Jordan, dripping wet and then... he's in the desert... dried off and then some.

In the first story, he's listening to a voice from above saying, **“You're my son... I love you and I'm so proud of you.”** Then he's in the desert... hearing other voices... lots of them... competing voices.

It's euphoria and it's a very real struggle.

And please imagine it that way... it's not a picnic. Jesus isn't at a retreat center where he's gotten away from it all for a while. The experience in the desert is never like that... You know, don't you... about the desert?

Jesus goes from what appears to be a real spiritual high... right into some sort of initiation. We shouldn't be so surprised should we, that the journey moves Jesus from blessing to wrestling. It moves us too... from closeness into times of great dryness and loneliness and we tend to say, **“No fair.”** We tend to say, **“What's wrong... I must have really messed up because things are so flat now... they're dead. Where'd I go wrong.”**

Jesus seems to know something that most of us don't know. Something about the desert is important and necessary. Jesus knows... and the Spirit knows, because the Spirit leads him there. Human beings are complex and the world is too... And there's stuff within and without we can't see... And if we only look at and live on the surface we'll likely miss all that is there.

Jesus is in the desert in order to face what is beneath the surface... to listen beyond the surface. It's a place where he will hear, and hear all sorts of things... voices... competing voices. There's a committee meeting going on in every human soul... And Jesus' soul was no exception.

Jesus is human but one who needs to be in the desert... because there are some things Jesus must learn and he learns this as we learn this. He doesn't get it by divine download. He walks the path we all must walk... he must become, grow as Luke said he did, **“in wisdom and stature in relationship to God and to people.”** Jesus is on a journey too.

I know you want to give Jesus a “get out of the desert free card” but you can't...

That's a heresy...

He's completely human...

emptied of all that divinity, says Paul.

So after this very real, flesh and blood human being says yes in baptism, he heads to the desert. **The Spirit leads him there...** which is to say that this sort of experience is God's will... it's a necessary thing. Saving the world means first leaving it.

What was it like?

Have you ever been silent for a day?

Alone for a couple of days?

By yourself for a week?

What do you imagine it was like for Jesus?

This place where Jesus went is about 35 miles long and 15 miles wide right between Judea and the Dead Sea. It's a terrible wilderness called "**Jeshimmon,**" which means "**the devastation.**"

The hills there are more like dust heaps.

The limestone formations blister and peel.

The rocks are bare and jagged.

The ground sounds hollow to horses' hooves.

It's as hot as a furnace.

There are huge 1200 foot cliffs that dive down to the Dead Sea. It is an awesome, lonely place and Jesus was out there for 40 days. (Barclay p 65) Jesus has to go to the desert. That's where we get face to face with things that matter.

The New Testament tells us that Paul spent a number of years out in the desert after his conversion. He was a smart and educated man... he'd even talked with Jesus one-on-one but he wasn't ready yet, so he went out there.

The people of Israel weren't ready and they had to wander out there in the desert for forty years... trying to grow up to be ready for the next thing.

Moses winds up in the desert... What is it with the desert? In the early centuries of the Church's story... the most serious Saints seem to always wind up out there. Like they were fleeing something and searching for something else.

It's very important for us to see this... Jesus intentionally pulls away and as he does he is engaged in a great struggle. Lot's of us in the room are uncomfortable with "spiritual warfare" language... but that's what this is.

The committee in his soul can be heard out there in the desert.

The voices can be identified... within and without...

They're shouting some of them.

Some of them pleading... some complaining... some suggesting.

Do these voices have faces out there... I don't know... something tells me a voice with a demonic looking face wouldn't be so hard for Jesus to contend with. Anyone could say no to that... It's the voices within... The voices that sound reasonable and on our side.

What does it sound like in the committee meeting of Jesus' soul for forty days? I suspect like it does in yours.

“Where is that feeling I had at my baptism... it seemed so real. Maybe it was just all emotion? Maybe I cooked that up myself?”

“Maybe so... but what difference does this make anyway? Does any of this really matter? Do I? Who cares? Why am I taking all this so seriously? Have some bread...”

“Of course, it matters. Your cause is just... you’re right and you’re righteous... and you’re just the one to do it. Those other leaders are no good... you’re better than they are. But don’t you wish you had their position? They don’t deserve it, but you do.”

It’s a noisy committee meeting and so many want their say.

“If you only had control... wouldn’t it be nice to be in control and have the power to fix all this... you’d know exactly what to do. Find a way to take charge... worship whatever can get you there.”

“Remember what it was like at home... let’s just go home. Quit working so hard at this. The world isn’t worth it and where is God anyway? If God is real why can’t God be more real?”

It’s an endless committee meeting.

“I’m tired... I just want to go to sleep.”

“They don’t deserve you. They’re taking you for granted.”

“You’re a failure aren’t you... or at least that’s the way it looks.”

“They won’t believe you and they won’t like you?”

“It’d be so nice to be liked... do something great and win them over, first.”

“I’m not smart enough for this...”

“They’re not good enough...”

“God isn’t real enough...”

“Die... you won’t die...”

“Suffer... what difference could that make?”

“I’m afraid...” “I’m mad.” “I’m bored.”

And on it went for Jesus... And on it goes for us. The question is... do we ever slow down enough to hear it. Do we descend into the desert so we can see it. We’re so immersed in our culture and our captured by our small selves... and who would want to sit in on this committee meeting.

Who’d want to face this board of directors? The problem is, if we don’t, they run our lives unbeknownst to us. They make big decisions while we’re out of the room. They put plans into action and we end up living according to plans that are driven by the worst parts of who we are.

Jesus went into the desert... and said, **“Let me hear it.”**

Although I think Jesus felt very much alone in these 40 days and in other huge moments, **“Why have you forsaken me?”** I do not believe he was alone. Nor does he... believe he is alone. He keeps throwing himself on God and trusting himself to God.

He keeps aligning himself with a view of the world and himself and reality that comes from beyond this small conversation in the soul.

“We don’t just live by what satisfies our felt needs...”

“We only worship God and nothing else can have that place.”

“We don’t test God... we trust God.

It’s not about proof... but trust.”

He isn’t alone... but that does not mean the battle isn’t real and intense. This is so intense... always intense. Why would we think it would be easy for us if it wasn’t for Jesus.

Have I ever confessed to you that envy is a real problem... the need to be seen and seen as stellar or novel or neat... and neater than the average “preacher bear.” I’ve been more aware in recent years but, I tell you, awareness of that hasn’t made it go away. I’m in a battle. I have to keep throwing myself on God and God’s grace. I have to keep aligning myself with God’s ways and reality.

I wish it were different.

See a problem... a weakness... a sin...

Confess it and be done with it.

But no... we have to wrestle. Why is life so hard? And why is it still hard when you’ve said yes to God? Ever get weary? Weary with what someone described as **“A battering from without and a boring from within.”**

Thomas Keating tells the story of a certain scientist who devoted his whole life to developing this butterfly that would be brilliant with color... the prettiest ever. After years of work and experimentation, he was sure that he had it and it was in this cocoon stage and soon would come out as his masterpiece.

On the day that they expected the butterfly to break out, he gathered his entire staff and they waited with Champaign glasses and cigars in hand and held their breath. Then finally it happened. The creature came out and they were about to pop the cork when they notice with concern that the butterfly’s left wing was stuck in the cocoon.

It was desperately trying... flapping its wings... trying to be free. As it labored, it seemed to grow exhausted. Each effort seemed harder and the intervals between efforts grew longer.

Finally, one of the staff just couldn’t stand it any longer. He took the scalpel and he cut a section from the cocoon... Then the butterfly made one last great effort and it fell free on to the table... as the bubbly went flying and cigars flaming.

The contagion of congratulations was interrupted though by a sickening sight that left them in pained silence. The butterfly was free... but it could not fly.

The struggle to escape is nature’s way of forcing blood into the extremities of a butterfly’s wings so that when it emerges from the cocoon it can enjoy its new life and fly to its heart’s content.

By interrupting the painful process... by removing the struggle, the scientist had created a limited creature. A butterfly that could not fly... a contradiction.

A mistake God will not make... for sure. God sends us into the desert and even holds back in some form His mercy because we have to grow up.

Leave us with our addiction to every form of earthly bread imaginable? Enslaved and not really free. Never...

Limit us by leaving us with our lust for power and our need for control? God forbid.

Abandon us by allowing us to believe our felt needs and our real needs are one and the same? No way...

Rescue us before we've had the chance to realize how dependant we actually are on divine grace? It won't happen.

Leave us centered in everything but Eternal Love? In other people... in pleasure... in accomplishments... in status... in certainty? May it never be.

God's love will always cause the scalpel, that will give us a limited freedom' to be held back... half free, partly awake, semi loving... is easy.

If you're serious about following God and walking the way of Christ... You'll be led into difficulty or left there... You will... but it's because you're loved and because you're needed as a fully functioning grown up child of God.

And growing and becoming is hard...

But remember... you're not alone. One of the gospels tells us at the end that of the battle, angels showed up to minister to him. I like the way Clarence Jordan wrote it in the Cotton Patch Gospel (a gospel set in the American South). The angels showed up and ministered to him with a whole sack full of chili cheese dogs.

So, there is a battle... but there are also chili cheese dogs. And communities of faith... loving friends with angelic shoulders... And there is wisdom. And there are small moments of grace and strength and light. And there is Jesus... who has shown us the way. Amen.

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