
Full of the Spirit

Luke 4:1-13

A Sermon preached in Page Auditorium on February 14, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” and we all want to be “full of the Holy Spirit.” Don’t we? This is one time it would be okay for someone to tell us, “You are full of it.” Wouldn’t it be great that when someone left our presence they had the feeling that they were in *the* Presence? Wouldn’t it be great to light up someone’s life so much that they use the words of Stevie Wonder to tell us, “You are the sunshine of my life”? We want to bear this kind of fruit as a sign that we are full of the Spirit although we may not be so sure what that means. Some argue that a ‘Spirit-filled’ person has to be engaged in hand-clapping, foot-stomping, body-swaying, head-bobbing, knees-shaking, sweat-flying, amen-calling worship or silent-making, candle-lighting, cross-signing, genuflecting, ordered liturgy. Notice that Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit” and none of this happens.

What occurs may actually surprise you compared to what we might normally expect from the Holy Spirit—the Spirit leads Jesus to the wilderness, a desert. Not a 14th century British gothic cathedral or a Cistercian monastery in France or a storefront church in the South called “The Fire Next Time Revival Tabernacle of the Most High God of Holiness.” The Spirit doesn’t lead Jesus to a building structure full of people but *because* he is “full of the Holy Spirit,” he is led to a desert, only occupied by him and his opponent, the devil. This plays with our standard catechesis on the work of the Spirit in the Christian life yet there really isn’t anything standard when you’re dealing with “a wind that blows where it wills” (John 3).

So Jesus rolls through the Jordan River after his baptism and doesn’t end up in the Promised Land. It’s like what Dr. King said in his last speech—“I may not get there with you.” For some, their life’s work is sowing seeds in the wilderness, never reaping milk and honey or if you prefer, chicken and waffles. The baptism of Jesus at which the Spirit descends and anoints him, lands him in a wilderness. This is not what’s supposed to happen after the Jordan.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan.

Deep river, Lord,

I want to cross over into campground.

Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast,

That promised land where all is peace?...

I want to cross over into campground.

That promised land where all is peace—that’s the planned trajectory. No one desires the desert. Over the Jordan was Canaan land, the dream, the hope, the spiritual jackpot, but what we find is that on the other side of the Jordan for Jesus, on the other side of the Jordan for many of us, after our baptism, is a wilderness vacant of living water. The Spirit doesn’t prevent Jesus from being apprenticed in suffering. He’s famished by hunger when it’s all over but he’s still full of the Spirit and led by the Spirit. The Spirit never leaves Jesus even when he ends up in a dry thirsty desperate place with a fanatic, Bible-quoting devil. It’s interesting how the Bible can be used against you at times. Ironically, an adversary interprets the word of God, the Scriptures, against the incarnate Word of God. It’s a sobering reminder of how Scripture can be used against you, to hurt you, to oppress you, to trick you, not that Scripture is the problem, but our interpretations may be.

This isn't how it's supposed to be in the Spirit, full of the Spirit, so we think! When the hand of the Lord was on Ezekiel he was brought out by the spirit of the Lord and set down in the middle of a valley of dry bones (Ezek 37), a place of contamination and death. The Spirit led him to dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. Somehow the Spirit moves and ministers in domains of death and dying, which maybe why the Spirit fills us—because we are on the verge of death and God is sustaining us by his life. Being full of the Spirit means that you might be led to a wilderness for forty days like Jesus or like Israel who was in the wilderness for forty years (Deut 8:2-6). Being led to the wilderness is bad enough but a forty-day tour is unbearable. Forty seconds would be sufficient. But wilderness experiences don't have a specific timeframe. They are just a part of the journey with God.

People will have to wrestle with their demons, not just once but twice and maybe even three times like Jesus. It's not easy in a wilderness but neither is hanging from a cross. Fred Craddock, the great New Testament and homiletics scholar, once said, "Being committed to the way of God in the world does not exempt one from the struggle. In fact, it is those who are most engaged in the way of God who seem to experience most intensely the opposition of evil. If Jesus struggled, who is exempt? Nor did the presence of the Holy Spirit mean the absence of temptation; rather, the Spirit was the available power of God in the contest." The Spirit is the promise of the present and future presence and power of God in our lives, even in the wilderness.

"Those [preachers] in fancy cars, with diamond rings..." (Sugarland "Baby Girl"), body guards, and million dollar private jets may mute this desert dilemma of the gospel. It may not even appear to be the gospel to them. But the gospel is not just a wide grin, it is also a groan; it includes temptations and walks through a wilderness.

He knew he was dying. He walked out of his bathroom in his bedroom toward me. He was slightly bent over as he approached and as I looked in his direction and noticed his *lento*, his slow, pace, I couldn't help but hear faintly the beginning of his own requiem. I couldn't help but notice his feet. They were swollen like two solid rocks of steel. His feet didn't really come off the floor. He had to slide them across the ground. It was as if his feet were walking hesitantly, toward the inevitable. His feet retold a poem we've heard before—"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." I will walk through the valley even in my bedroom. I will walk through the valley in my office. I will walk through the valley in the hospital. Jesus walked a lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself. The Spirit led Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," into the wilderness. This is not popular preaching with high ratings for reality TV but it's true and the truth will set us free. If you are full of the Spirit as a Christian, you will face your own wilderness at some point. But the Spirit doesn't desert you in the desert. Your feet may not be swollen because of fluid retention. But your stomach may be queasy, your heart may be achy, your mind may be fuzzy and you may be tempted.

But the temptation may not be what you think. According to Craddock, "the real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise." The temptation is to rise. He reminds us that in the Garden of Eden, the tempter didn't ask, 'Do you wish to be the devil? But do you wish to be as God?' We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power to do. Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, take authority over all the kingdoms of the world, and throw himself off of the temple to show God's protection. He could have done all of these things so the temptation was to show his power, not his weakness. He was tempted to rise though his earthly journey was going to lead to a fall.

Crucified

Laid behind a stone

[He] lived to die

Rejected and alone

Like a rose

Trampled on the ground

[He] took the fall. (Michael W. Smith)

None of us are protected from suffering, not even the Christ. Yet we are given resources in the wilderness. First, remember that you are “full of the Spirit” and that in and of itself is life because the Spirit is life. God is with us through the anointing Spirit of our baptism. And second, there is the word of God. Throughout the Scriptures, there is a rich connection between Spirit and word from the Old Testament to the New Testament. They are a kind of hand in glove. In the wilderness, Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit,” doesn’t turn to Harry Potter novels. He turns to the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures, the word of God. A Spirit-filled person will turn to the Scriptures for guidance in times of turmoil because it takes more than our own resources to be saved out of tough situations. We can’t necessarily look to ourselves for answers. Like a good rabbi, Jesus turns to the word of God, his sacred texts. He turns to the religious tradition in which he was nurtured. He looks beyond himself for solutions to his wilderness experience.

What does he quote? Verses from Deuteronomy chapter 6 and chapter 8 (Deut 6:13, 16; 8:3)—One does not live by bread alone; Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him; Do not put the Lord your God to the test. These are texts that were the commands given to Israel when they were tested in the wilderness. Jesus draws on the spiritual resources from his Jewish tradition for guidance. He wields the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, to fight his battle (Ephesians 6). This isn’t the only time he does this because when he begins his ministry, and we are told he is “filled with the power of the Spirit” as he returns to Nazareth, what does he do? “He stood up to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...’”(Luke 4). The enfleshed Word of God feeds on the word of God.

It’s a lesson for all of us this Lenten season—God has provided resources to help us in the time of trouble so we don’t have to fear the desert. God and the Word of God accompany us. When Jesus turns to the Scriptures as a function of his memory, he remembers the word of God but also his religious tradition and the history of the children of Israel as part of the larger story of God with God’s people, and the cloud of witnesses, including the writer of Deuteronomy, and also God. We have company. ‘Com-pany.’ In Latin, *com-panis*, literally meaning, “with bread.” In the wilderness, we may not have physical bread, but we are with bread, the Bread of life, on his journey to the cross. The Bread of life is the Word of God and “one does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4).

Jesus draws on his scriptural memory in the wilderness. This is the exact opposite of what many people refer to as the biblically illiterate church and culture of our time. Many argue that Christians don’t know the Bible anymore—the key stories or themes or characters or the grand arch narrative—as Christian education or Sunday school, has declined over the years. There’s some truth to this—that some may be able to quote the Beatles or Beyoncé better than the Bible; this should trouble us because for people of faith the Scriptures provide a lexicon for the Christian life, a language for speaking of God and God’s people, a narrative of the history of God in the world, the gospel story of Jesus, and the future of all of creation. If we don’t know Scripture, we will be limited in our understanding of God because it is a witness to the living God in Christ.

Now don’t go and write a daily blogger to say that I said Scripture is God or the Bible is God because that’s definitely not what I’m saying. I don’t adhere to bibliolatry; I worship God, not the Bible. I know the Sunday school song: “The B.I.B.L.E, yes that’s the book for me, I stand alone on the word of God, the B.I.B.L.E.” Although standing alone on the word of God may be fine, I suppose, how you interpret it is what matters! And I’m aware that just the mere use of Bible words does not necessarily convey the will or love of God. Any interpreter can proof text or *eisegete* and perhaps make the Bible say anything they want it to say. Frank Sinatra said, “Alcohol may be man’s worst enemy, but the bible says love your enemy.”

At the same time, the Church has passed on the good Book, the Bible, the Scriptures, as an inspired revelation of who God is and what God has done throughout the past, present, and future. It, through the work of the Spirit,

can be your company, *com-panis*, your bread on the journey. We may chew on it but hopefully we don't spew it out at others who may not believe what we believe or act how we act. As we chew, hopefully we understand. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed that "The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly." This is what makes Mark Twain say, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand."

And though we may struggle with understanding at times, in the wilderness, the Bible may be the balm you've been waiting for. Think about funerals and memorial services and how people turn to Scripture for hope and comfort. Psalm 23—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." John 14—"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" At critical moments in life, when we lack words or human resources, we turn to the Word and divine resources. We turn to what is inscribed on our minds and hearts. In other words, we remember.

Every time Jesus quotes a scripture from memory in the desert he begins with, "It is written." For Jesus, the Scriptures were written on his heart so that he could draw on them in the time of need. It's like what we hear from God in Jeremiah, "I will put my law within [the house of Israel], and I will write it on their hearts"(Jer 31).

What is written on your hearts? This becomes so important in the wilderness because this is what you will lean on in hard times. This is what you remember when everything else might be lost or out of reach. Your memory may be your lifesaver. Your memory may be the drink you need in the parched land. Of course, there is selective memory and even amnesia. Of course there is temptation, struggle, loneliness, and loss. But in remembering the word of God, the Scriptures, we are ultimately remembering God, remembering from where we come, remembering that, as St. Augustine says, "The Holy Scriptures are our letters from home." We remember that we are remembered. We remember that our home is with God and as we remember these love letters, these Scriptures, as Jesus did, we are reminded that God remembers us even as God writes his holy signature of love on our hearts through the Spirit.

We have holy company in the wilderness and hopefully we've realized that we were never actually alone though we may have felt otherwise. "It is written" and we are part of the story God has been writing on the canvass of the universe since its inception. We are in our own chapter and it includes a wilderness but the wilderness is not forever. Just as Jesus returned to his home after the wilderness we are on our way home too and I can't wait to read the ending.