

Jesus, Lucio and Salvatore in the Wilderness (Luke 4:1-13)

Reading about Jesus' experience in the wilderness as we enter this Lenten season reminds me that even with his divine lack of yielding to temptation, Jesus was human. And to be human is to be tempted. Jesus was tempted by the devil three times in his wilderness journey, and in our life's journey we are all tempted innumerable times to betray the Jesus within us all.

Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit" relied unfailingly on the scripture he knew and loved so well. "Man cannot live by bread alone," he replies to the devil's first temptation, not completing the phrase from Deuteronomy which continues, "But by every word that comes from the mouth of the God." Jesus is proving himself to be following to the letter the ancient Jewish teachings. The quotes he uses immediately follow and encompass the prayer that was and is at the heart of Judaism: the *Shema*: "Hear, Oh Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." Jesus is faithful to the teaching and he survives to the end of his journey with the unbroken *Shema* still ringing in his ears.

What we need, what we try to create in our Lenten attempts to follow Jesus' lead, is a kind of Lenten void- a wilderness into which something sacred may present itself. By the same logic that meditation is a stilling of the busy mind for a short period of time to listen to the still inner voice, so Lent gives us a much longer period to try to do something of the same thing.

In our experience of Lent, we all wander through our various wildernesses, we all face temptation in various forms, and we all scan the horizon for hope, for an answer, for meaning in our lives, like sailors straining for a glimpse of land.

One wilderness sojourn I read of lately touched me as being as close to Christ's enforced depravation in the wilderness as any I could think of. Like Jesus' experience it was filled with Spirit, wilderness, great length of days, danger and temptation.

Very early one October morning three fishermen cast off into the sea with faithful hopes for a great catch of fish. They were dark, sturdy men, seasoned fishermen, men of simple tastes and little education. They were very much like those Gallilean fishermen who soon left their nets to become

fishers of women and men. They were men of faith, participating every year in a festival in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, throwing roses and plastic crowns in the sea beneath her statue to induce the saints to protect them at sea. As if there were not enough religious overtones to this story, the names of the three fishermen were Salvatore (the savior) Lucio (the light) and, of course, Jesus.

They had planned on a 3 day fishing trip, so none of them had brought much with them. Salvatore, who was the most experienced of the three, brought only a knife, a mirror, a comb, scissors and a Bible. They were hired by a captain with much less experience than they, and he brought along a sidekick who knew nothing at all. Jesus was the only one to bring a compass. No one thought to bring a radio, a cell phone, a life jacket or a single oar.

After an unexpected storm ripped away their fishing net, the captain made his first mistake. Rather than heading back to shore, he insisted on using the rest of their fuel to try to find the valuable missing net. After a time the engine failed and they waited for another boat to rescue them. But in the etiquette of Mexican fisherman, the other boats, not perceiving their desperation, kept their distance so that their nets would not tangle. After a few days fog set in and they were unable to see any land at all. All the food was gone. The captain's friend who had refused to speak to anyone but the captain, ceased speaking at all and began to cry.

Just as they were all sure they would die of thirst, a fine mist began to drift down on them that soon turned to real rain. It continued to rain off and on for their entire journey, just often enough to provide the water they needed. Salvatore, the most devout of the group, said that with the falling of that first rain he knew that God was with them and that they would not die. He knew that God sent the rain and would send whatever they needed.

And in fact, God did. When they had eaten no food at all for thirteen days, the manna from heaven appeared in the shape of a turtle from the sea. A huge sea turtle, appeared at the bow and without hesitation, Salvatore jumped off the boat and on to the back of this huge beast, who responded to the assault rather diabolically, by diving deep into the sea. Salvatore stayed in the saddle and wrestled the beast back to the surface where Jesus and Lucio helped him drag the turtle into the boat, and they made their first meal- turtle sushi. The captain and his friend, of more refined tastes, could

not bring themselves to eat the raw turtle meat, which was the only food they had that month.

On Dec 12th- the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, their second turtle appeared. Jesus and Lucio began to believe as Salvatore did, that it was indeed God who provided the turtles and the rain, and the three fishermen began to devoutly read Salvatore's Bible and pray. Salvatore kept track, and they eventually feasted on 108 divinely provided sea turtles. With the miraculous appearance of the 2nd turtle, the captain and his friend again tried to eat the meat, but were still unable to do so. The captain's friend began to weep non-stop and the captain became increasingly ill. Lucio came down with an ear infection, and Jesus and Salvatore took turns caring for them doing what little they could- rinsing their mouths with fresh water, keeping them warm. Lucio soon recovered, but the captain and his friend did not.

With remarkable resourcefulness, the fishermen took apart their motor and fashioned fish hooks out of wires and screws, and soon supplemented their turtle diet with a prodigious catch of fish. They ate dogfish, shark, sawfish and dorato. They began to catch enough that they had surplus and they learned to cure the fish and dry it in the sun.

Still the captain and his friend could not eat the plenty that was given to them. After they had been at sea for three months, the captain died, his friend succumbing soon after. Salvator, Lucio and Jesus gave them a 3-day wake, and a funeral with singing of hymns and readings from the Bible. They then slowly and respectfully and lowered them feet first into the sea.

During March, during Lent, the ordinarily cheerful Jesus began to be morose. He had left his pregnant wife and realized that she would be bearing his child about that time. He began to weep every night and finally one night Lucio could bear it no longer and he mocked him for crying like a baby. Jesus shot back that at least he had a wife and a child to cry about while Lucio had nothing. The raw nerves of the two friends ignited into a wounded fury.

Salvatore, who slept between them because of his stabilizing abilities, was able to calm them down, although they moved to opposite ends of the boat and did not speak to each other for some time. The small boat became a wilderness all of its own. Finally Lucio approached Jesus and apologized. Jesus forgave him and the incident was forgotten.

Soon after that they realized that they had survived at sea longer than anyone they had ever heard of, and still believing they would be saved they celebrated, perhaps around Easter. Salvatore continued to read the Bible to the others and would sometimes sing hymns. By now all three had formed a habit of kneeling and praying together and Jesus even persuaded the other two that if they were rescued they should all quit drinking alcohol as a penitent gift to God.

In August they were rescued by a fishing boat 600 miles from Majuro, which is 2,700 miles NE of Australia and 5,000 miles from their home port in Mexico. They had sustained the loss of two companions, overcome their own battles and survived on nothing but fish, rainwater, scripture and prayer for nine months in the open sea.

How did these three fishermen survive their wilderness journey? The temptations were many. They were tempted to jump off the high pinnacle of the fishing boat- located so high above the ocean floor. They were tempted to give in to bickering and pettiness and almost came to blows. They were tempted to give in to despair. But to an amazing extent, they, like Jesus relied unfailingly on the scripture that they knew and loved so well. With their adoration of Salvatore's Bible and their highly unvaried diet, they perfectly fulfilled the old scriptural dictate, "Man cannot live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the God."

Lucio, Salvatore and Jesus survived because they loved and took care of each other and because they forgave each other. They had faith that God would save them, they prayed and read their beloved scripture and they accepted the gifts of life that God gave them- not only the rainwater and the turtles and the fish, but the wilderness experience itself.

The floating wilderness trek seems to me to be an encapsulation not only of any Lenten journey, but of the journey of life itself. We all set sail having no earthly idea how long the voyage will be and who will survive it. We all are gifted with things we do not want to accept, we all find ourselves in the same boat with people we sometimes find infuriating.

In our lives today, both personally and collectively in our country and our faith community, we find ourselves in a wilderness where love and compromise do not seem to win the day. We find ourselves lacking in

compassion, we are so tempted to speak from the pinnacle. And yet we don't seem to be able to come up to the level of Lucio, Salvatore and Jesus, let alone Jesus.

But if our Lenten journey seems to magnify rather than shrink our faults, then let our journey of Lent be a journey of learning rather than perfection. And we can take comfort from the words of another Christ-like sojourner. As Mahatma Ghandi said, "My failures and imperfections are as much a blessing from God as my successes and talents, and I lay them both at God's feet."

Amen