

Journeying with Jesus into the Wilderness



Our journey into the “wilderness” was unlike any of the other holy sites we visited during our pilgrimage in Israel. Bible scholars and archeologists do not know the path that Jesus took, or what caves He might have rested in during his forty days and nights in the wilderness, and while there are a few churches and monasteries within the Judean Wilderness (such as the Monastery of the Temptations), there are not many, nor did we have the opportunity to visit these sites. Yet, there are few places that are more significant in the life of Jesus and the believer than the wilderness. Why? The Church knows that the wilderness is as much a spiritual reality as it is a geographical location and it is in this context that we will be “journeying with Jesus into the wilderness” in this photo-journal entry.

The account of Jesus’ journey in the wilderness can be found in Matt 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13, but we will begin where we left off in our previous photo-journey entry:

¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt 3:16-17)

What an amazing event this must have been for John the Baptist and for those who were witnesses of the baptism of Jesus. To have heard the voice of the Father and to see the Spirit descend upon Jesus must have left everyone present with a sense of awe and gratitude to be present in that time and place to witness the beginning of the fulfillment of the long awaited prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. What might it have meant for Jesus? Every son (or daughter or that matter) would like to hear the affirming words that Jesus heard from His Father that day emerging from His baptism. Could these words have meant any less to Jesus than it does for us? Hardly, for the love that Jesus has for His Father far exceeded the love that any human son or daughter has had or ever will have for their earthly fathers. Since He was twelve Jesus sought to do His Father’s will, but He had been instructed by the Spirit to spend the next eighteen years with Joseph and Mary doing their will, and being obedient to them. Now, at last Jesus was ready to begin His ministry. Was He ready? The words His Father spoke appeared to be an affirmation that Jesus’ time had come:

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

But then, in the very next verse we read:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2)

Surprised? I would be. “Now son, since I am so pleased with you I’m going to send you into the wilderness and be tempted by the devil.” Gee, thanks Dad. Well, that would be my sarcastic response, although we can be quite certain Jesus didn’t respond like that. But, it still leaves me asking: Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness? What is the wilderness? Why get the devil involved? Before we attempt to answer these questions, let’s spend some time discussing the significance of the wilderness, and a bit about the devil.

Why the Wilderness?

On the natural level the term “wilderness” generally describes a geographical location vast, unknown, inhospitable, and life threatening—a wasteland that can, and often does, devour those who enter it. In Israel during the time of Jesus this wilderness was the Judean Desert, and it was here that the Spirit led Jesus. Approximately 1500 years before Jesus entered His wilderness Moses and the children of Israel entered the wilderness of Sinai. Both of these stories have much in common. They both spent an interval of forty in the wilderness: years for Moses and Israel, and days, for Jesus. Hence, forty has come to mean in biblical numerology a time of testing and trial to prepare those

who are about to embark on a great mission of God. For Moses and Israel it was the conquest of the Promise Land, and for Jesus it was the salvation of humanity and the establishment of the Church (the Kingdom of God on Earth). In addition to forty, they both experienced physical, psychological, and especially spiritual trials unique to the wilderness, although the wilderness need not be limited to a geographical location, but it always leads to the “valley of death” within our own hearts and minds. The psalmist who wrote Psalm 102 captures the depths of the wilderness of heart and mind:



¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. ² Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. ³ For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. ⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. ⁵ Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. ⁶ I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. ⁷ I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. ⁸ All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. ⁹ For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink, ¹⁰ because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. ¹¹ My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. (Psalm 102:1-11)



Jesus in the Wilderness, 1898 Briton Riviere

The “wilderness” is the “dark night of the soul” where one is tested, and tempted and this is often accompanied with a sense of isolation, abandonment, helplessness, and often hopelessness. The wilderness’ objective is to reveal the faithfulness and obedience of those who have entered its arena. That’s right, arena, because it is here that we undergo combat with our *fallen* human nature—our will, desires, passions, the instinct for survival, and ultimately whether we will place our trust in God, or yield to disobedience and despair.

This is the struggle that Jesus referred to when He said to His disciples regarding John who, like Jesus, well understood the trials of the wilderness,

¹² *From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.* (Matt 11:12)

Bishop Kallistos Ware helps us to understand this difficult passage: “Man must do violence to himself—to his fallen self, that is to say—for the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and it is the men of violence who take it by force.” Ware then goes on to quote Saint Theophan the Recluse, “Nothing comes without effort. The help of God is always ready and always near, but it is given only to those who seek and work, and only to those seekers who, after putting all their powers to the test, then cry out with their whole heart: Lord, help us.”

Strive as we may and should by our human will and effort the wilderness faithfully delivers us to the end of ourselves. This is the intersection of the will’s terminus and God’s grace. Again Ware says, “We are told to hold in balance two complementary truths: without God’s grace we *can* do nothing; but without our voluntary co-operation God *will* do nothing.” It is at this nexus of our weakness and His grace that the devil steps into the arena to move us from this spot. Why? Because it is here that Christ’s strength is perfected:

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ *Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,* ⁹ *but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.* ¹⁰ *Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* (2Cor 12:7-10)

It takes violence to arrive at this nexus and it takes discipline and obedience to stay there especially when the devil is firing his “fiery darts” at us. This is the training that the wilderness boot camp delivers:

⁵ *And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children— “My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; ⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.”*

⁷ *Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸ If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹ Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* (Heb 12:5-11)

But before Christ’s strength could be perfected in us, it had to be perfected in Him first; and this is answer to our question, “Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil?”

Wait a minute! Am I saying that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to become “perfected”? No, I am not saying that, the Holy Scripture does.

⁷ *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.* ⁸ *Although he was a Son, he **learned obedience through what he suffered;** ⁹ and having been **made perfect**, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who **obey him,*** (Heb 5:7-9; emphasis added)

Jesus *learned* obedience. He learned it from Mary and Joseph; He learned it in the wilderness. And He suffered. And He was tempted by the devil just like us:

¹⁴ *Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.* (Heb 4:14-15)

Many of us carry around in our thinking assumptions about Jesus. It's easy to read the passage of scripture describing Jesus' time in the wilderness and assume that because He is divine that these trials and temptations were probably not too difficult for him. But, then we read the scriptures quoted above and we realize that we are being confronted with a much deeper mystery than what our assumptions can explain. For those who might be interested in diving deeper into the Mystery of the Logos' incarnation and *kenosis* I have included a chapter from my book, [Come, Let Me Show You The Bride](#), at the end of this photo-journal entry. Let it suffice to say here that Jesus entered the wilderness and *willed* that He suffer all the trials and temptations that we experience, and entering into our weakness He transfigured the wilderness so that it becomes a place where our weakness can become His strength.

In voluntarily becoming weak in His human *will* and *energy* the wilderness and the temptation became a boot camp for Jesus. What He experienced in the wilderness would prepare Him for similar trials and temptations that would await Him during His public ministry and Passion:

⁴ *For indeed he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives by the power of God....* (2Cor 13:4)

The temptations that Jesus faced from the devil in the wilderness of Judea were analogous to what Moses faced with the children of Israel in the desert wilderness of Sinai. Whereas Moses, as a foreshadower of Jesus, faltered when the people tested him, Jesus would not, and in so doing He "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him:"

...So also we are weak in him, but toward you we shall live with him by the power of God. (2Cor 13:4)

We should note that the devil's temptations always involve an element of truth, and he is excellent at quoting scriptures,

¹⁴ *And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.* (2Cor 11:14)

He inhabits our wilderness. He may cause us to question our sonship with the Father. If our present circumstances seem to us unjust he will be quick to confirm our opinion. If the pain of the cross appears too unbearable, he will tell us to come down off of it. But, Christ victory in the wilderness is our victory; His strength is our weakness.

The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness: The First Temptation

² *He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry.* ³ *The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread."* ⁴ *He said in reply, "It is written:*

'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'" (Matt 4:2-4)

Jesus' response to the "tempter" comes from Deuteronomy chapter eight:

"All the commandments which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers. ² And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. ³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8:1-3)



Jesus understood what the purposes of the wilderness were; and the reason for the fasting and the hunger. He endured the trials, learned obedience through the things that He suffered, and having been made perfect His human will became perfectly aligned with that of His Father's:

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. (John 4:34)

And what was the will of the Father for His Son? It was not to turn stones into bread, but to become the new manna, which comes down from heaven:

³² Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always." (John 6:32-34)

Just before Jesus spoke these words some disciples asked Him for a sign like God had given their ancestors in the wilderness:

³⁰ So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform?" ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" (John 6:30-1)

Jesus was the sign:



Father Joel celebrating Mass in the Wilderness

⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." ⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; ⁵⁴ he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. ⁵⁶ He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.

⁵⁸ This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever." (John 6:48-58)

Jesus' greatest sign that He continues to offer to us, and His definitive victory over the devil's temptation was performed at the last supper and His passion:

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." (Matt 26:26)

The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness: The Second Temptation

The devil tempts Jesus again, this time by quoting a passage from Psalm 91:11-12

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” (Matt 4:5-7)

Jesus response to the second temptation of the devil comes again from Deuteronomy:

¹⁶ “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.” (Deut 6:6)

This passage refers back to an event that occurred between Moses and the children of Israel in Massah in the wilderness.

¹ From the wilderness of Sinai the whole Israelite community journeyed by stages, as the LORD directed, and encamped at Rephidim. But there was no water for the people to drink, ² and so they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses replied to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to a test?” ³ Here, then, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “Why then did you bring us up out of Egypt? To have us die of thirst with our children and our livestock?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me!” ⁵ The LORD answered Moses: Go on ahead of the people, and take along with you some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the Nile. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink. Moses did this, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ The place was named Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD in our midst or not?” (Exo 17:1-7)



It was important to the devil that Jesus fail this temptation because Moses failed this test (some forty years after the Massah and Meribah incident) under very similar circumstances with the same people, but in a different wilderness:



Moses Strikes the Rock
Saint Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh

¹ The Israelites, the whole community, arrived in the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed at Kadesh. It was here that Miriam died, and here that she was buried. ² Now there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. ³ And the people contended with Moses, and said, “Would that we had died when our brethren died before the LORD! ⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? ⁵ And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.” ⁶ Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, ⁷ and the LORD said to Moses, ⁸ “Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water; so you shall bring water out of the rock for them; so you shall give drink to the congregation and their cattle.” ⁹ And Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as he commanded him.

¹⁰ And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their

cattle. (Num 20:2-11)

Moses, a foreshadower of Jesus disobeyed by striking the rock instead of speaking to it as the Lord had instructed him. Why? We can only speculate, but when we hear his response to the people, calling them rebels, one gets the sense that he was frustrated by the endless complaining, murmuring, and rebellion of the people for whom he was

responsible. Was he focused too much on the people and not on God? Did he miss the instruction to speak to the rock and not strike the rock as he had done previously in Massah and Meribah? Is it possible that Moses did not honor God when he appears to take at least partial credit for the miracle by saying, “shall *we* bring forth water for you out of this rock?”

Jesus would face similar temptations to focus on the people who were often as stiff-necked and rebellious as the people Moses had dealt with for forty years. The first two temptation begins with “If you are the Son of God...,” challenging Jesus to prove Himself to devil; precursors to the many times that the people would challenge Jesus to demonstrate His divine credentials. They posed this temptation to Jesus even while He hung on the cross:

³⁹ *Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God, [and] come down from the cross!”* (Matt 27:39-40)

But Jesus kept His eyes fixed on the Father. Perhaps in the wilderness and on the cross He prayed silently the psalm that the devil had tempted him with:

¹⁴ *Because he clings to me I will deliver him;
because he knows my name I will set him on high.*

¹⁵ *He will call upon me and I will answer;
I will be with him in distress;
I will deliver him and give him honor.*

¹⁶ *With length of days I will satisfy him,
and fill him with my saving power.* (Psalm 91:14-16)

The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness: The Third Temptation

We are going to continue to draw connections between the temptations of Moses and Jesus in the wilderness. In the third temptation the devil brings Jesus to a high mountain:

⁸ *Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence...* (Matt 4:8)

It was not long after Moses failed at Kadesh, that the Lord brought him to a high mountain:

¹ *Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, the peak of Pisgah which faces Jericho, and the LORD showed him all the land—Gilead, and as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³ the Negeb, the plain (the valley of Jericho, the City of Palms), and as far as Zoar. ⁴ The LORD then said to him, This is the land about which I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, “I will give it to your descendants.” I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over. ⁵ So there, in the land of Moab, Moses, the servant of the LORD, died as the LORD had said; ⁶ and he was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; to this day no one knows the place of his burial.* (Deut 34:1-6)



Why was Moses not allowed to enter into the Promised Land? The Lord explained to Moses the consequence of his disobedience at Kadesh after he struck the rock:

¹² *But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron: Because you did not have confidence in me, to acknowledge my holiness before the Israelites, therefore you shall not lead this assembly into the land I have given them.* (Num 20:12)



Monastery of the Temptations
Mount of Temptation, Jericho

On a very high mountain the devil is now showing Jesus what has been promised to Him:

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 11:15)

Jesus knows the price He will have to pay for His Kingdom—the humiliation, and degradation of the Cross. The devil is not asking if Jesus is the Son of God any more; he gets straight to the point:

⁹ and he said to him, “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.” (Matt 4:9)

But the Son of God did not become incarnate to be a king, but to be a servant:

⁶ [Christ Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

Keeping His eyes fixed on the Father, Jesus knew what His mission was and so His response was unequivocal:



Moses on Mount Nebo

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” (Matt 4:10)

Moses died and did not enter the Promised Land. Jesus died on the cross, but the Son in whom the Father was well pleased, was raised from the dead. And because He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death....

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him

the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and

under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

It was Joshua, another foreshadower of Jesus, who led the children of Israel through the Jordan and into the Promised Land. It is Jesus whom we follow, through the waters of Baptism, into the Church and towards the Promise of His Kingdom.

Kevin’s Reflection: Lessons from the Wilderness

My parents lived in the “wilderness” for as long as I knew them, which were about 34 and 40 years for my mother and father, respectively. The nature of this wilderness is irrelevant here, but I now understand better, by virtue of writing this photo-journal entry, the lessons that I learned from my parents while I journeyed with them in this wilderness. Some might argue that there must have been some sin, perhaps of my father’s, that led him, and by association us, into the wilderness; if there was I have no knowledge of it. Did the Holy Spirit lead my parents into the wilderness as He had Jesus? I don’t know that either. What I do know is that a lesser man and a lesser woman would have chafed under its unrelenting futility; would have become bitter, resentful, and murmured against each other, circumstances, and against God Himself, but neither of them gave into this most natural of human responses. I cannot remember a single complaint, and if there was one, I never heard it. They might sound like saints, but they were not. My father was a man who wore his feelings on his sleeve: passionate, quick-tempered, ready to give a hand to someone in need or a closed fist to anyone who offended his honor or to protect the innocent from abuse or injustice. My mother on the other hand was often hard to read; and keeping to her own council, rarely discussed or mentioned anything to me that might have been troubling her. She was gentle, loving, and steadfast to her children; and often sometimes I wondered why my mother was also this way with my father. The reader (if there is one other

than myself) may wonder why I am taking so much space to discuss this era of my life. My answer is simply because this time in my family's wilderness was very formative to my life, and it has been a mystery to me, that is, until now. It may mean nothing to the reader, but this Journey with Jesus into the Wilderness has offered me new insights into my parents, particularly father, and myself.

My father was not an easy man to live with sometimes, actually most of the time. Nevertheless, I learned a lot from him particularly as it pertains to this discussion on the wilderness, as it was in this wilderness that I knew him. On the affirmative side, he taught me how I should face adversity; on the negative I learned through his mistakes. There were three axioms that my father lived by, and he expected me to live by them too. The first of these axioms was, "It's a long way from your heart." I heard this often by my father; it needed no explanation, as I knew what it meant by context. Like any boy I often injured myself doing what kids do, or sometimes things just happen that require a trip to the doctor or the emergency room. When I would present myself to my parents with an injury, preferably to my mother as she was more sympathetic, and if it were serious enough my father would assess it. After the assessment my father would proclaim, "It's a long way from your heart." This was the signal to stop whining or crying because death was not immanent, but that is not to say that pain was not. A case in point:



From left to right: my dad (Leo J. McMahon), William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy), and Russell Hayden (Lucky).

Russell Hayden played Lucky Jenkins in the popular Hopalong Cassidy movie and television series in the 1950's. My father was Hoppie's stunt man and he played a number of bit roles in the series. Apparently, Russell and my father were good friends. Russell, who also added his screen name to his own, gave my father a pocketknife for a gift; it was inscribed "Lucky," but if anything had ever been misnamed it was that knife. I was around twelve years old when I developed a hard roundish growth on the bottom of my right foot. I didn't discuss it with my parents as I was pretty sure I knew what would happen if I did. I was right, of course, but by the time my parents noticed my change in gait my foot problem had gotten significantly worse. My father insisted that I show him my foot; he recognized the problem immediately.

"It's a plantar wart. It will only get worse if it is not removed," my Dad said.

My worst fears were being realized. "You're not doing it, are you?"

I already knew the answer. We didn't have the money to go to the doctor.

"Now is a good as time as any," my father responded not bothering to answer my question. He instructed my Mom to get a plastic tub, and to fill it with water and ice. He proceeded to get "Lucky" from his desk, turned the stove's burner on, and began sterilizing the knife's single blade, which my father kept scrupulously honed. I placed my bare right foot into the freezing water bath; where I was assured it would become numb. My mother returned with gauze and bandages. Dad pulled a chair close to me, and took off his thick leather belt.

"I'm going to cut the plantar wart out. It's a long way from your heart so keep your foot still," he said, handing me his belt. "This is going to hurt. Bite on it."

I could feel the warm steel against the bottom of my foot. Tears welled up in my eyes even before the pain began. He stopped, looked into my eyes and said, "Offer it up."

"Offer it up," his second axiom, was usually conjoined to the first. The two together meant simply this: when facing difficult times, don't complain and don't whine. Believe that God ordains everything in our lives, blessings and suffering, therefore, submit to them as His will for you.



And I did believe it because I knew my father did by the way he lived his life. I never heard him complain; if he did it was between him and God. And whenever my father injured himself, whenever he was sick, or whenever things

didn't go the way he had hoped and prayed for (and things rarely ever did) he would "offer it up," that is, his pain and suffering, along with his disappointments to God. My father wasn't a bible scholar, nor was he a theologian; he was a cowboy stunt man who had also been a soldier in Europe during the War. He didn't wear a hair shirt, he didn't invite pain, suffering, and disappointment into his life, they were uninvited guest who showed up too often and then stayed around too long. Once in, they were accepted, but that was not enough for my father—they were a way to participate with Jesus; and in that way pain and suffering could be used for good.

Somewhere along the way my father learned that we are made worthy of the Kingdom through suffering...

⁵This is evidence of the just judgment of God, so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering. (1Thes 1:5)

...and that the discipline we learn through suffering is evidence of God's love for us:

"My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; ⁶for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts." (Heb 12:5-6)

But, I am sure that for my father, the most important value of suffering was to "offer it up" for the benefit of others:

²⁴Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, (Col 1:24)

For my Dad suffering was the "currency" of the Kingdom; with it you could go to "God's Heavenly Store of Graces" and buy spiritual blessings like virtues, time off of Purgatory for a deceased loved one, healing for a friend who was ill, or perhaps forgiveness for a sin committed. After all, Jesus purchased our salvation with His blood on the cross, perhaps a little suffering on our part, my father reasoned, could purchase blessings from God for those we loved.

In any event, I survived my father's surgery, my foot healed, and the plantar wart never came back. My dad, after I returned his belt back to him, laughed; apparently I put another hole in his belt.



My Mom, Caroline Helen Finger McMahon

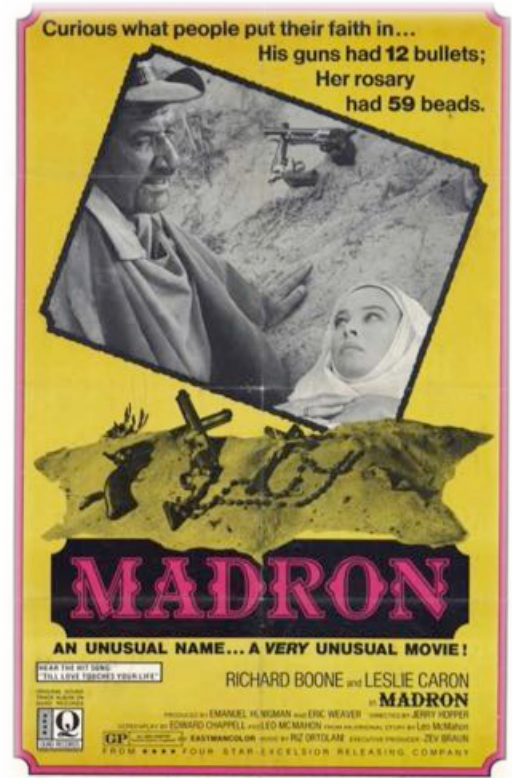
After an injury my father had to retired from stunt work. He turned to writing screenplays specializing in Westerns. Unfortunately for all of us, Westerns had run their course in the American culture as moviegoers turned to other genres. My father had some moderate successes, but never enough to produce a steady income. Nevertheless, my father never gave up. "Persistence ever, discouragement never," he would say and frankly, I don't know how he lived it, but he did, and that was his third axiom. I grew up watching him write his screenplays on yellow legal sized pads, and listening to the klickety-klack of my mother turning my father's nearly indecipherable handwriting into something legible on the Smith-Corona typewriter. Producers showed interests in the scripts, deals were promised, but then unexpectedly and sometimes under the most bazaar of circumstances fell through. Again and again the cycle repeated, but my father kept writing and my mother kept typing. I wondered how they, we, did it; it seemed to me a lesson in futility. I don't think we would have made it had it not been for my mother. Her

quiet genteelness, unwavering love of her family, and ability to find happiness and satisfaction in the simplest of things made her an oasis in our wilderness. For me, my Mom was like Mary who pondered "all these things in her heart," and she held her suffering under a tight embrace so that she could be that oasis to her family.

These were the affirmative lessons I learned from my parents, to keep things in perspective (it's a long way from my heart), my suffering, when joined to the suffering of Christ, can be a blessing to myself and more importantly others, and God honors persistence. I also learned from the mistakes my parents made, and one in particular is relevant to our wilderness.

Like Moses my parents never crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, or at least that new home in the West San Fernando Valley that my father had promised my mother. I've thought a lot over the years as to the reason why. Why were we stuck in the wilderness of seemingly endless misfortune? I know some might attribute my family's circumstances to just bad luck, but I don't believe in luck, and neither did my father, it was contrary to our understanding of Providence. Had my father "struck the rock" and denied us, or at least he and my mother, from entering the Promised Land. I believe he did, and while I do not blame him for it, I believe there is another lesson to be learned here.

My father was a very proud man, sometimes recklessly so. In the late 1960's my father had been working on a Western screenplay called Madron. A Hollywood producer purchased the script and had successfully pulled together investors to start production. Actors, a director, and crews had been contracted. The investors, however, wanted changes to the story. My father didn't like the changes so rather than getting paid to do a rewrite he angrily said "to hell" with the project. The producer got another writer to do the rewrite. My father was deeply offended by the changes that were made in his story. Nevertheless, the movie was made and my father (and the family) was invited to a grand Hollywood Premier at the Gramman Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Wow! Everyone in Hollywood, and I mean everyone would be there. My father refused to go. I argued with my father.



"Dad, you have to go. Everyone will be there. Think of the opportunity. Think of the contacts. You'll meet people. What about all those other scripts you've written and are ready to go?"

"No!" my father replied, emphatically. "They ruined my story. They turned it into a piece of crap!"

"Dad, you don't know that; you haven't seen it yet. Besides, even if they did most of the movies that are made are crap, that doesn't stop them from making more movies and making a bunch of money while they're at it."

"No. I'm not talking about it anymore."

And that was it. It was then that I realized that my father was more than happy to cut his nose off to spite his face. Why? Pride. By that time we had already spent a good fifteen years in the wilderness, and things pretty much went downhill from here. He was a stubborn man. I wonder what might have happened if he had humbled himself and asked God what He wanted him to do? (and yes, I do believe God "speaks" to us). It didn't happen and so in the wilderness we remained. I wrote earlier that the objective of the wilderness is to bring us to the end of ourselves, to acknowledge our weakness, so that Christ's strength might be perfected in us. There is no sin that thwarts the wilderness more than pride, as it prevents us from ever acknowledging our weakness.

The irony of this story is that my Dad, just like Moses, was standing in the wilderness right on the brink of the Promised Land and he didn't recognize it. How ironic was it? As it turned out Madron was the first American movie (at least Western) that had been filmed in Israel. Where was it filmed? In the Judean wilderness where Jesus was tempted! It was as though God had invited my father to humble himself, speak to the rock which is Christ, and He would have led him into his promised land. But, he would not.

I was angry with my father for many years after his pride prevented him from taking the opportunity that could have changed his and my mother's lives. Now it just makes me sad. I told this story because it is a cautionary tale, to avoid pride, as there is no greater block to the grace of God than this. There is another lesson to learn from this story, and that is that God is utterly ruthless with those He accepts as sons:

"...for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts." (Heb 12:6)

The lesson is simply this: If you want to have a relationship with God, be careful what you wish for; “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.” (Heb 10:31)

I can tell you from experience, the “way is narrow.” The best thing we can do is to submit to Him humbly, recognize that there is in us no good thing. We should stand afar off striking our breasts like the Publican with head bowed praying, “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And I trust that the Lord granted my parents mercy. God in His goodness allowed them to see their children doing well with families of our own, and I’m sure it held for them that bittersweetness that Moses must have experienced on Mount Nebo watching his children enter the Promised Land. I have every expectation of faith that I will see them again in that Promised Land of the Kingdom of God.

Jan’s Reflection:

We know that the Father was will pleased with His Son prior to the wilderness as evidenced by His words at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Immediately following the baptism Jesus is driven into the wilderness where He is tempted by Satan. The wilderness is a barren, hostile, lonely, inhospitable environment where Jesus had harassing temptation and trials with the devil. Jesus did combat with the devil by fasting, prayer, and speaking God’s word. He endured forty days of hunger and temptations and then He exits the wilderness to start His public ministry. No doubt He is now prepared to move into His ministry.

After reflecting on the time Jesus spent in the wilderness I have a whole new appreciation and understanding of it. Jesus transfigured and redeemed the wilderness: “We do not have a high priest Who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses.” I believe that the wilderness is a place we must enter in order to grow in Christ and enables us to have a more intimate relationship with Him. It is a place hidden from plain view where God prepares His purposes for our lives. Understanding the necessity of the wilderness help me to endure what must come and gives me peace for the times of uncertainty and difficulty. In the past I’ve dissipated so much of my emotional energy and just felt wasted. God sends us into the wilderness and He is the One who brings us to the end of ourselves so that He can show us His love and betroth Himself to us.

Psalm 102: A Prayer While in the Wilderness

Hear my prayer, O LORD;

let my cry come to thee!

²Do not hide thy face from me
in the day of my distress!

Incline thy ear to me;

answer me speedily in the day when I call!

³For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.

⁴My heart is smitten like grass, and withered;
I forget to eat my bread.

⁵Because of my loud groaning
my bones cleave to my flesh.

⁶I am like a vulture^[a] of the wilderness,
like an owl of the waste places;

⁷I lie awake,
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

⁸All the day my enemies taunt me,
those who deride me use my name for a
curse.

⁹For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,

¹⁰because of thy indignation and anger;
for thou hast taken me up and thrown me
away.

¹¹My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.

¹²But thou, O LORD, art enthroned for ever;
thy name endures to all generations.

¹³Thou wilt arise and have pity on Zion;
it is the time to favor her;
the appointed time has come.

¹⁴For thy servants hold her stones dear,
and have pity on her dust.

¹⁵The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth thy glory.

¹⁶For the LORD will build up Zion,
he will appear in his glory;

¹⁷he will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their supplication.

¹⁸Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the
LORD:

¹⁹that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,

²⁰to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;

²¹that men may declare in Zion the name of the
LORD,

and in Jerusalem his praise,
²²when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.

²³He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.

²⁴“O my God,” I say, “take me not hence
in the midst of my days,
thou whose years endure
throughout all generations!”

²⁵Of old thou didst lay the foundation of the
earth,
and the heavens are the work of thy hands.

²⁶They will perish, but thou dost endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.

Thou changest them like raiment, and they pass
away;

²⁷but thou art the same, and thy years have
no end.

²⁸The children of thy servants shall dwell
secure;

their posterity shall be established before
thee.