

If you were alone on a deserted island (or stuck alone in the wilderness) what's the one thing you'd want to have with you? A cell phone? A certain song? A pizza? A pet? Remember the answer you've got in mind now. I'll come back to that in just about 5 minutes.

This is the first week in Lent and the lectionary takes us back a bit in the Gospel of Matthew. Where in the last few weeks, we've talked about Jesus' ministry, now we're going back to the point right after his baptism. Gospel writer Matthew has an economy of words. He's given us the bare bones of the situation. I want to flesh it out a bit more. So let's hear the story anew...

The desert sun beat down. His throat was parched; his skin hot and blistered. He lifted the hair from the nape of his neck, seeking relief from the oppressive heat. He had been out here for days. Days merged into weeks of this solitary existence. He was alone with his thoughts.

How had this come to pass? He'd studied religion, done everything right, and had been even be praised for his faithfulness. And then, led here--to this uninhabited, inhospitable region. Solo. No provisions. No shelter. The unfamiliar surroundings were dangerous, he knew, and he was bone tired. Having to be constantly vigilant, dangers lurking by night and day. His state of mind, wary. His state of being, weary.

The only comfort of home was his faith.

He clung to his father's words, uttered just before this ordeal. He recalled them now, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Is he pleased now, the man wondered? It's been what, 40 days? Will it be 40 years in the wilderness like Moses? And for what? Surely there is a reason, he thought. Spirit led him here. And he clung to his faith.

He tried to lick cracked lips, but his mouth felt full of cotton. A cup of cold water would be heavenly and a thick hunk of warm bread to feast on somewhere, perhaps by the sea. Hunger was a constant ache

He had dutifully followed the dove out here where the sun was a constant torment by day, the sounds of wild animals rustling a torment by night. How much more? There was no one around. No one, that is, until the tempter appeared, preying on his needs.

The evil one came and taunted him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." The evil one questioned his heritage and preyed upon his immediate need for food. Jesus knew that "Son of God" was not merely a title used for the Emperor, it was the truth about who he was. He didn't take the bait to perform a miracle on demand. He knew that God had provided manna for the Israelites and that God was caring for him, even through this ordeal. Jesus was hungry, but unwilling to sacrifice his faith (that is, an eternal spiritual ideal) in order to satisfy a temporary physical need. In the preface to his book, *Desiring God*, John Piper says, "What we hunger for most, we worship." Jesus reminds all of us, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The evil one took him to a holy place and challenged him to do something dangerous to see if God would save him. He even used the words of the Hebrew Bible! Jesus recognized that the evil one was saying 'prove who you are' and Jesus again resisted the temptation to show off, quoting from Deuteronomy for a second time.

The evil one took him to a very high mountaintop (and we know that mountaintops, being the highest earthly points, are where people expected to connect with God). He said that he would give Jesus all of the kingdoms if Jesus will but declare his allegiance to the evil one. Jesus recognized that the evil one didn't have that power. It was a lie. He was offering something that wasn't his to give. Finally, Jesus says, Jesus says, "Away with you!"

He quotes Deuteronomy for a third time and says, "I worship only God." After this happened, angels came and waited on Jesus.

Here are some key points in this passage: Jesus himself faced difficult times. He was put in situations that were disordered and unruly. He was vulnerable. He faced temptation. These are all things that I expect any of us can relate to feeling. Jesus was alone, possibly wondering why he was going through what he was going through. He may have wondered when things would get better. Have any of you ever felt this way? Faith got Jesus through. He stayed the course, doing what he knew was the right thing to do. Out there in the wilderness, when he and the devil were alone, he could have done any of those things the devil dared him to do. No one would have known. But Jesus would have known. And he took his call to worship God seriously.

As Christians, we can believe that all that time he was in the wilderness, though it appeared that Jesus was alone and he may have even felt alone, God was with him, keeping an eye out for him. God cared for Moses and the Israelites when they wandered in the wilderness and God cares for you, too, in those troubled and frightening times. We know there was evil in the wilderness, but there were also angels.

Last week, we talked about waiting. We used examples of cocoons and seeds to show that even when we don't see or understand what is happening in God's embedded process, metamorphosis is happening. Jesus understood that.

The devil goaded Jesus to turn stones into bread, but Jesus knows that's not God's way. In the Book of Genesis, God planted a garden. Bread is made from wheat. The wheat has to grow and then the wheat and the chaff are separated. The grain would have been ground, mixed with water, perhaps some salt and honey, and then set on stones or baked in a clay oven. That's how bread is made, not with the blink of an eye or the wave of a hand. God's processes take time. Relationships take time. Understanding who we are as Christians takes time. Drawing closer to Jesus takes time.

We may never know why Jesus had to be in the wilderness or why we have to experience troubled times. We may not understand how those difficult experiences transform us, but we can be firm in our faith. Each time Jesus was pressured, taunted, and provoked; he responded with grace and with Scripture.

Each of the devil's proposals had been conditional. Jesus noted that he began with "If you are the Son of God." Because Jesus knew he was the Son of God, he had nothing to prove. When we are secure in ourselves we have nothing to prove. We can be secure in who we are and, more important, whose we are.

If you were alone on a deserted island (or stuck alone in the wilderness) what's the one thing you'd want to have with you? Would it be your faith?

May faith be a constant blessing to you this Lenten season. May your faith be a comfort. May your faith be a promise. May your faith bring hope. Blessed be and amen.