

From Ashes to Fire

Luke 4:1-13

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In my study of our text this week, I came across a writer who refers to Lent as a journey from Ashes to Fire. In the upside down, inside out world of the kingdom that sounds just about right, doesn't it? In the kingdom, inert ashes grow into a conflagration, and not the other way around. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, the inauguration of a time of introspection and penitence and moves us toward a blaze of glory which is Easter Sunday; or if you prefer, Ash Wednesday is the entry point to a journey that takes us to the ninety days following—that is, through Easter and Eastertide to the tongues of Fire of Pentecost. Either way, like the author said, we are moving from Ashes to Fire as one would expect in the upside down, inside out world of the kingdom.

Today's scripture passage from Luke gives us a description of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. It's almost a carbon copy of the same story told to us by Matthew. Mark, who is notorious for his mincing of words, is much less descriptive than Matthew and Luke. Mark sums up Jesus' forty days as simply, "Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him." My thinking is that the readers of Mark, which was written a good ten to fifteen years earlier than Matthew and Luke, were not content with that brief a description. They complained, "There's got to be more to the story than 'Jesus was tempted by the devil, that he was with the wild animals and the beasts.' What exactly did Jesus do in the wilderness? Forty days is a long time. Didn't he get hungry? How exactly was Jesus tempted? Did he survive the temptation or was he overcome?"

Matthew and Luke then, are welcome corrections to the earlier version.

There is one thing that all the versions of the temptations have in common, however. Jesus went into the wilderness immediately following his baptism. Jesus' forty days have been variously compared to a vision quest, a rite of passage and a spiritual pilgrimage. No matter what you call it, it was a prelude to his ministry—a time to get his head and heart right before he took on the monumental tasks that he would be called to accomplish as the Son of Man. In Lent, we are encouraged to go on a vision quest or a spiritual pilgrimage of our own. We too need to get our own heads and hearts in proper alignment. We too have tasks to perform as Christians who have been called to follow Christ.

The jury is still out whether it matters; your motivation for going on a spiritual pilgrimage. There are those who may take to the trail to “get some exercise” just as there are those who may fast during Lent to “lose some weight.” A friend suggested to me that it doesn’t matter why you enter into spiritual practices as long as you do them. That just doesn’t smell right to me. If you say you are going on a spiritual pilgrimage, and then, under your breath you add, “to get physically fit;” or if you say you are fasting during Lent and under your breath add, “to drop a few pounds,” then you have entered into your spiritual practice at cross purposes. Either the pilgrimage or the fast is about you or its about your relationship with God. Which is it? You have to decide. If you engage in a spiritual exercise do so because you want to be more spiritual. Be honest with yourself. Keep to your integrity.

That said, I admit that I am not an expert on the subject of pilgrimages. I confess that I have never myself been on a spiritual pilgrimage. What I know about them you could stuff in a small backpack, with room to spare.

What I know about pilgrimages comes from a casual reading of **A Walk in the Woods** by Bill Bryson. If you’ve read that book then you know that it is a memoir of Bill Bryson’s hike along part of the Appalachian Trail. It’s not a religious book by any stretch, but it is an honest account of what it is like to, well, walk in the woods, and live off the land for a length of time—say forty days. I also had conversations this past week with friends who enjoy hiking and camping in the wilderness and do it with some regularity and expertise. Besides my casual reading and having conversations about wilderness experiences, I have drawn on my own “almost pilgrimage,” along the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Unfortunately, that pilgrimage never got off the ground, both literally and figuratively. But more on that later.

Several things you should keep in mind as you are deciding whether to step out on your own wilderness walk: You should know that people react differently to the experience. In **A Walk in the Woods** I read that Henry David Thoreau who made his career as a writer and lover of nature, hiked in the Mount Katahdin wilderness in Maine. Apparently, Thoreau was used to the tame gardens of New England and not the wild and claustrophobic surroundings of a treed forest. Thoreau became hysterical among the tall trees and rough terrain. He later referred to the Katahdin wilderness as “grim and wild...savage and dreary,” fit only for “men nearer to kin to the rocks and wild animals than we.” (from *A Walk in the Woods*, p. 45)

A friend who is a serious hiker and camper says that “You can’t tell who is going to take to the wilderness experience until you are on the trail. A minor crisis presents itself, and some people are going to rise to the challenge and others are going to freak out.” Suffice it to say that a pilgrimage experience will teach you about you. Do you have the character

of a Thoreau or of a Lewis or Clark? Will you rise to the challenges on the road, or will you be the first to turn and scurry home?

I heard Bill Bryson talk on TV about his experience along the Appalachian Trail. He said that he brought along several notebooks. He intended to take voluminous notes during his trek. He barely filled one small notebook. That is because, as he said, "There was nothing to write about. The trails all looked the same, the trees all looked the same, the hills all looked the same." He was not attacked by a bear. He was not mauled by a mountain lion. He did not have to keep his wits about him in a tornado or earthquake. He did not have to outrun an avalanche of falling rocks. Nothing on his pilgrimage made for an exciting plotline. His subsequent book, then, was based on his thoughts and his conversations with his traveling companion, an overweight, slightly fanatical Katz. So it is on a pilgrimage. Do not expect breathtaking landscapes. There may be a few, but more than likely they will be few and far between. Do not expect high drama, either. This is a time for internal dialogue. And it is a time for conversation with your traveling companion, who, in our case, is not the fanatical Katz, but God.

A friend who leads ski trips in the winter and canoe and fishing trips in the summer told me this, which is good to know as we begin our journey. Be vigilant; be cautious; be watchful. He once led a week long ski trip in Colorado. One of the participants left behind the group's stove. Not only are stoves used for making water from snow, but they provide warmth and they are used for cooking meals. He says that when the group discovered the missing stove, he sent two of their party back to fetch it; but they could not return until the following day. The group spent one miserable night on the snow covered slopes of Colorado, very cold and very hungry. Again, be vigilant, be cautious, be watchful.

Now for my own almost pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago.

A man came to me several years ago, wanting me to help him gather some "religious types" together for a summer pilgrimage in Spain along the historic Camino de Santiago. According to legend, around the year 812, a religious hermit discovered the long forgotten tomb of the [Apostle James](#) by following a falling star. His chance finding gave birth to what would become the Camino de Santiago. Millions of devout men and women came on pilgrimage to venerate the saint's bones throughout the Middle Ages. It is still a route followed by pilgrims today.

At first, the would- be pilgrimage planner and I garnered significant interest and enthusiasm for the trip. A pilgrimage in Spain, what could be more exciting! Interest began to wane, though, once he outlined the

specifics. For one thing, the list of what “NOT TO BRING” was significantly longer than the list of what to bring. Listed in the “What to Brings:” one change of clothes, soap for outdoor bathing, toilet paper for outdoor potty breaks, a lightweight blanket for outdoor sleeping, and power bars. It became clear that this pilgrimage was less in the line of a vacation, and more in the line of Outward Bound. It was a pilgrimage that most of us were not inclined to make. The demands were just too great. Someone suggested hiring a van and van driver to carry our less essential, well, essentials. Our trip planner would have none of that. People began peeling off. Like I said, the trip never got off the ground. We may be Christian, but hey, we aren’t Jesus. We want our wildernesses to look and feel less like wilderness and more like home. That is probably the most difficult habit to break if we are to be serious about our Lenten pilgrimage. We have to break the habit of our comfortable lives.

Which gets us to what Jesus learned and what we too, may learn if we are willing to take to the road on a spiritual pilgrimage.

- 1) We learn that we do not live by bread alone, or by shampoo, indoor plumbing, or mattresses alone, either.
- 2) We learn perspective. We are small compared to the imposing treescape of the wilderness. In other words, we learn that we are not gods. God alone is God.
- 3) We learn to be vigilant, cautious and watchful. The Arabs have a delightful saying that says this best: Pray to God, but don’t forget to tie up your camel. Do not test the Lord your God.

We know all of this already, of course, and yet we don’t. We’ve heard it, we’ve read it, we’ve experienced it, to a degree, and yet, this wisdom has not yet taken up permanent residence in here and in here, which is the reason we need to go on a pilgrimage.

Our spiritual journey will take us from Ash Wednesday to Easter or if you prefer, from Ash Wednesday to Pentecost. Either way it is a pilgrimage from ashes to fire. When we arrive we will be ready to undertake the tasks to which we have been called as Christians. May it be so for you and for me. Amen!