

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS

*Tell me how did you feel, when you come out of the wilderness?
How did you feel, when you come out of the wilderness?
How did you feel, when you come out of the wilderness?
Leaning on the lord*

*Well, I felt like shouting, when I came out of the wilderness.
I felt like shouting, when I came out of the wilderness.
I felt like clapping, when I came out of the wilderness.
Leaning on the Lord*

*Well, I told everybody, when I come out the wilderness.
I told everybody, when I come out the wilderness.
I told everybody, when I come out the wilderness.
Leaning on the Lord*

*Tell me how did you feel, when you come out the wilderness?
How did you feel, when you come out the wilderness?
How did you feel, when you come out the wilderness?
Leaning on the Lord*

*Well, I felt like shouting, when I come out the wilderness.
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Leaning on the Lord*

African American sacred song

Mark 1:12-13

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

When I was a little girl growing up in the South, many Black people went out into the woods to tarry for days where they wrestled with the impediments that stood in their way of living into the commitment of having the will to live into their new life as Christians. Their sojourn in the wilderness occurred before joining the church and becoming baptized. It was a necessary stop on a journey towards a new life and new relationships with God and others.

My mother often told the story of her time in the woods as a young girl seeking to join the church. The woods in the country were dark, and every sound felt ominous. She always chuckled when she remembered that she never got down to the task of hearing God because of her fears of snakes. The imaginary rattling sounds of snakes in her head drowned out everything except the hissing of snakes.

My image of the woods as a dangerous place filled with lethal snakes that lurked everywhere stayed with me, and I thought that if I had to go into the woods to get religion, I would never get it. This terrifying image of danger and death was my frame of reference about going into the wilderness to find God. It was my first thought when I heard in Vacation Bible School the story of Jesus' retreat in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights to wrestle with Satan. In my mind Jesus was in the wilderness packed with snakes.

Before I realized it, I blurted out, "was Jesus afraid?" Little did I know that my childish question inadvertently expressed a primordial and universal fear. It is one that keeps adults from taking an inner journey into the wilderness of their souls to wrestle with the socio-spiritual impediments that interfere with redeeming the consciousness of God that the guardians of power remove out of us with empire opiates such as power, fear, and a need to belong and matter. Therefore, our task in the wilderness is a spiritual one of recovering our wounded and comatose souls. In another way of speaking, our struggle in the wilderness is a spiritual one where we must locate and touch the breath and imprint of God in each of us and in others.

The passage from Mark presents a picture of a newly baptized Jesus on a spiritual journey of recovery and renewal. His baptism signaled an act of liberation and new beginnings where he intentionally declared his mission to free himself from the grip of the socio-spiritual lusts, opiates and rituals learned and practiced from structures and governments that men made in the world. At the same time, he knew that baptism was a declaration of intention which could only be achieved with self-critique and scrubbing away of the lies and illusions of our spiritual malformation and social perversity.

During his journey in the wilderness, Jesus sought to confront these human temptations by harmonizing his inner consciousness with the way he intended to live out his call and lifestyle. He realized that all of us bear the marks of Empire culture. He understood the importance of intentionally confronting and eliminating the systemic impediments and appetites that stood in his way of carrying out his mission as God's servant. In short, the writer of Mark reminds us that Jesus was fully human with all the universal strengths and internalized flaws that come from living in a society with regulations, requirements, and values that socialize us to become objects of rulers rather than children of Spirit God.

In our reading of the text, it is critically important for us to accept that Jesus did not stand outside of history. Neither do we. Instead, we are part of our collective and particular histories. Without this context, we strip Jesus bare of his place in his

community and his relationships with others including the nature and origins of his relationship with God, Rome, and his community. Richard Horsley points out the problem with a decontextualized Jesus. “

“Trying to understand Jesus' speech and action without knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African Americans in the United States...” Horsley, Richard, *THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE NEW WORLD DISORDER*, (Fortress Press, MN, 2003), loc. 189 kindle.

We further rob Jesus of any moral accountability or responsibility to his community or to any collective agenda beyond his own individual inclinations or desires. Without socio-spiritual historical continuity and community roots, Jesus rises up out of history as the lone individual with his private relationship with God.

Jesus understood that Baptism was the first important step in a lifetime journey that involves following steps toward healing. These steps are recapitalization/ remembering; reparation based on confession and making amends; reconciliation/ process of being born again for both doer and targets of oppression and systemic violence; resurrection new life and relationships; redemption/hope, love, and salvation in action; and restoration/ reconnection with God, our authentic selves, others, and all other aspects of creation. In short, baptism is not the entire journey. Instead, we must as Jesus told Nicodemus be born again. To be born again is a dynamic process that requires us to constantly interrogate our assumptions about God, ourselves, others, and all aspects of creation. We must decide to whom we owe our greatest loyalty. Is it God or the Empire? What does it mean to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which belongs to God?

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