

The journey begins: Matthew 4:1-11

Neither the journey nor the wilderness comes naturally to Americans anymore.

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [February 3, 1999](#) issue

In 1932 my father met my mother by means of one of the great pick-up lines of their era. After a "young people's" social at their Lutheran church, he followed her along the park on the near north side of St. Louis to the streetcar stop. When he caught up to her, he said with the savoir-faire of a Lutheran Cary Grant, "Say, do you go to movies during Lent?"

I suppose you could say, "Thank God, even 67 years ago the church's regulations did not prevent an independent-minded woman with bobbed hair from saying yes to an interesting young man in a green fedora." But that's not my point. His question was more interesting than that. It presupposes a church whose practices set certain conditions on its members' daily existence. Lent was a holy time of prayer, self-discipline and extra churchgoing. When you skipped a meal or altered your social routine, you were trying to remember, if not always successfully, Jesus' sacrificial life and death. The church still recognized the incongruity between focusing on the crucified Christ on Sundays and dissipating your wits in movie theaters and speakeasies during the rest of the week. How quaint.

We do not want to reinhabit a culture that is no longer ours, but, if the 40-day period we are entering still shapes believers in the way of the cross and prepares them for the Lord's resurrection, we do need Lent. We need the sense of its holiness. We could use a little of its incongruity.

Every year we enter Lent as on a journey that begins with Jesus' own sojourn in the wilderness. Neither the journey nor the wilderness comes naturally anymore to Americans, who long ago completed their journey and tamed their wilderness. To be sure, we are a highly mobile people, but we don't seem to be going anyplace special. We move from town to town, job to job and marriage to marriage, but the telos of our wanderings and the satisfaction of our longings remain elusive.

Where are we headed? In my first parish, I ministered in a small rural community 50 miles from St. Louis. Most of my members rarely traveled so far as St. Louis, and their lives did not reflect the frenetic shifts so characteristic of American culture. In my three years in that parish, I never met anyone who was going someplace as the world measures mobility or advancement, but the entire congregation was rife with a sense of journey, and most accounted their life a great adventure. A woman named Annie was dying in the bedroom in which she was born, almost within view of the church cemetery where she would be buried. She had farmed her land, raised her kids and served her church. She had fought the good fight. *What a ride!* she seemed to say to me. *All the way from baptism in Emmaus Lutheran Church to burial in Emmaus Lutheran Cemetery. What a journey my life has been!*

This is the journey that counts. It is this journey we make every Lent.

In the Lenten Gospel readings the church will make its progress by means of a series of dialogues--on temptation (with the devil), on perplexity (Nicodemus), on longing for what is real (the Samaritan woman), and on the true identity of Jesus (the man formerly blind). We shall conclude with a couple of conversations about death and resurrection held in Jewish cemeteries. Along the way we will discover that the journey does not follow the familiar route from a lower-paying to a higher-paying job, from illness to health, or from misery to happiness. The Temptation, in particular, will renarrate Israel's experience as a pattern of the church's struggle in an alien environment called the wilderness.

Israel passed through the waters and wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, which turned out to be a place of apostasy. It was in the wilderness that Israel learned to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

In due course, another son of God passed through the waters of baptism. Jesus endured 40 days of testing in which Satan offered him the perennial alternatives to faithful Christian identity. The Messiah's only appeal against the needs of the body, the desire to avoid suffering, and the allure of political power was to the word of God. Where we failed and continue to fail, he succeeded. Where we try to have it both ways, he chose the single path. Now, baptized in his name, we walk in his shadow and fight all our battles in him.

It may seem quaint to us that some Christians still think they must renounce certain pleasures during Lent. But that is the way Jesus began his pilgrimage. Before he

could be the true Messiah, he had to discover the sort of messiah he would not be. In affirming God, he first rejected the blandishments and lies of the wilderness, just as in the baptismal liturgy the candidate says yes to God by first saying no to Satan, the evil powers of this world, and all sinful desires. At baptism the whole church thunders as one, "I renounce them."

Flannery O'Connor has a story about a little girl who loves to visit the convent and the sisters. But every time the nun gives her a hug, the crucifix on Sister's belt gets mashed into the child's face. The gesture of love always leaves a mark.

On our journey toward the resurrection, we discover our true identity or, better, it is imprinted upon us. For many it is a fearful experience of testing, but one that is moderated by a special grace: we make this journey together, with the whole Christian church on earth, and we follow the One who has already completed the course.