

*Disciplines of Readiness: Tell the Truth*  
Matthew 4:1-10

My daughter Stacey went to a high school that required, before graduation, that every senior go on a vision quest out in the desert of the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains. Three days and nights with no food, each student separated from all the others. They could take a journal and one book with them, but no more. I look back on that as a parent and wonder what were they thinking (what I was thinking), and didn't that seem dangerous? But I also thought it would be a great, character-building experience for my suburban, mostly well-coddled only child. I sent her off with all the safety gear they allowed, and a brand-new copy of *The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran (because that book had been meaningful to me when I graduated from high school), and a journal. I couldn't wait to see how she'd be transformed by this experience.

Stacey is not me. She never has been, but some moments make it crystal clear. She made it through those three days quite well. She filled her journal with thoughtful letters of gratitude to her family...and also a list of her favorite foods and television shows. Her first phone call after she got her cell phone back was to me...asking if while I was on my way to the school to get her, I could pick up a burrito.

(And lest I've given you a wrong impression of my perceptive, enlightened adult daughter, you should also know that she now has the final words of my benediction tattooed on the inside of her wrist.)

When a person goes out, alone, to a strange and uncomfortable place, something true about them comes to the surface. Almost every indigenous culture knows this. Ancient Africans, Aboriginal Australians, Native Americans all sent their young people out into the wilderness as a rite of passage, a physical symbol of leaving behind the patterns and comfort of youth. They knew that an experience of hardship and disorientation tempers arrogance and makes us more ready for the humility that a good, generous adult life requires of us. And so they *exile* their young people from home for a time, so that away from the comforts that had protected them from reality. They come home and *name things by their right names*—even themselves.

Our religious tradition doesn't articulate or practice this rite of passage in the same way, but you can see the pattern everywhere in our story. All the way back to Adam and Eve. Before they could become parents, they had to leave the Garden where they'd been swaddled in a safe and almost temptation-free environment for the first part of their lives. It happens collectively, too. When the Hebrews left slavery in Egypt they were a throng of individuals from loosely affiliated tribes. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness, out in the desert, far away from anything that felt like home, gave them their identity: a people in covenant with God.

And in the story we just read from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus. Before he could begin his ministry, the work that was the purpose of his life, Jesus 'was led', we're told, out into the wilderness, for a long time, long enough that he had to face his demons. Now the story of Jesus in the wilderness only makes sense if you know that just before he went out there, Jesus was

baptized. He came up out of the water and saw a hole in the clouds, and in it was a face looking straight at him. “You are my beloved child,” the voice said. Baptism is a naming ritual, a ceremony of identity. On the edge of a new and risk-filled life, baptism gave Jesus a new name: *beloved child of God*.

So he was ready to ask: What did this new name mean? Who was he supposed to be, as he moved into the world of power and influence, invested with this big name and a big responsibility? To know, he had to go out, away from home, away from all those voices that wanted something for him, and maybe from him. Out in the wilderness, where he got lonely and hungry and afraid, he found there were other voices inside of him. ‘Who are you?’ they asked. *Are you actually the beloved child of God? What does that even mean? What are you going to do with the power that comes with that name?*

Often when we tell this story we picture Jesus out in the desert with Satan and the wild animals, facing a tempter dressed up like an enemy Jesus had to fend off. But I think that’s wrong. That’s certainly not what temptation looks like in my life. Temptation sidles up to me like a friend. It has a logic of its own, and usually it’s pretty compelling. ‘You got this’ it says to me. ‘Make your own destiny. Just do what feels right, right now.’

In Jesus’ case, the temptations were about how he would use his power. (And I wonder if every temptation is about how we use our power.) That sweet voice in Jesus’ ear said, ‘You can do something spectacular. Just turn these rocks into food.’ And then, ‘Go out to the edge. You won’t fall. Other people might, but you’ll be fine.’ And finally, ‘You can have it all. Don’t limit yourself. If you’re the beloved child of God, doesn’t that mean you can do anything you want?’

He was Jesus, so he met every temptation by turning to face God, rather than away. When his body and his temptations were exhausted, Matthew tells us, “the angels came and took care of him.” They met his hunger with real food. He’d been humbled by knowing how real those temptations had been, how close he’d come to giving in. But he’d stayed true to his name, and to the One who had named him. Jesus’ time in the wilderness was absolutely necessary to who he was becoming. He *had* to wrestle with the power his name gave him before he could use it wisely, for good.

We too can find ourselves out there with Satan and the wild animals. Maybe that’s exactly where we’ve been in the chaos of the last year. Maybe the unsettledness of this time has left space in us to see the internal chaos that our busy, purposeful lives usually shield us from. Our angers and jealousies, our distance from others. Our grandiosities, addictions, mixed feelings. Our secrets; all those doubts about our identity, our place, our control over our own lives. Who are you, the voice of temptation asks us, if these other things are also true? Don’t you have some power you can use to rearrange the world so that it’s not so troublesome to you?

Maybe this time in the wilderness is necessary for us too. Our time for seeing, and naming, the truth about ourselves. Whether we call it the season of our Lent or the season of our exile, maybe its purpose, its necessary work, is the same. To call us to speak honestly about who we are—which is, truthfully, a pretty mixed bag. To wrestle with the uses of our own power that tempt us, every day, to try to be someone else. To act with more power than I actually own. To think that I,

or what I alone know, can fix things. To claim that I and the people I love deserve something more.

Time in the wilderness, far away from home, has work to do in us. There are things we can't learn from a lecture series or the best TED talk, or even a sermon. Like a young person preparing for adulthood, we can only learn from time in the wilderness to tell the truth about ourselves, maybe first to *see* the truth about ourselves. To know that we are not yet all that we were meant to be.

I too have been called 'beloved child of God.' I too have been tempted to assume God's blessing for my small ego agenda. I too have been tempted to be more, and sometimes less, powerful than I am. And unlike Jesus, I don't always say 'no'.

I confess my frailty not because I must atone for my flaws, but because there are angels waiting to feed me once I drop my defenses enough to be honest, to own the whole mix of my name.

Several years ago a movie was made called *Blood Diamond*, about a Mende village in West Africa that was attacked and destroyed during the civil war in Sierra Leone. Young boys were taken from their homes and renamed 'soldier', trained to fight alongside the rebels, taught to hate and kill their neighbors, even their own families. In the movie, a boy named Dia, the twelve-year old son of a fisherman named Solomon, is taken by the rebels, separated from his family. The whole family is lost to each other. Solomon, Dia's father, is forced to give up fishing and go to work in the diamond fields. One day, as he's working, he finds an enormous, flawless diamond. It's rare, worth a fortune. Solomon takes a big risk; and instead of carrying the diamond to his company, he hides it.

In this scene, Solomon has come back with a diamond dealer played by Leonardo DiCaprio. He's come to find that diamond. He will use it to pay smugglers to help him find his son and reunite his family. He makes it all the way to the field where the diamond is hidden. His head is down. He's looking for the precise spot. And then he looks up, and sees his son, Dia, who is now an angry soldier. Dia, who holds a gun that is pointed at Solomon's head.

Film clip - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygU3F1ho3gg>

In this Lent of your exile, don't be afraid to stare down your temptations. Tell the truth about yourself, so that you can hear and become your real name: *beloved child of God*. This is the work of this season. And when it is done, the angels will come and bring you home.