

Devils, Wolves, Doubts, and Wilderness (6Mar22)
Luke 4:1-13

We live in overlapping rhythms. This is the beginning of Lent. That pairs with the approach of spring. You may also feel rhythms of sports seasons—of NCAA basketball and or the strange lack of spring training baseball amid the labor lockout. It may be rhythms of living toward spring break or of doing your taxes.

An overlapping rhythm I feel is Aldo Leopold Weekend. I get to bike past his house daily, but he's especially on my mind this weekend. To overlap with Jesus in the wilderness, here's the end of Aldo's essay about wilderness called "Thinking Like a Mountain," picking up with a famous line after his hunting group had shot a mother wolf:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized...there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Since then...I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain...wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed... to death... Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with...the dead sage...

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades.

So also with cows. The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea.

We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with his supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman

with pen, the most of us with machines, votes, and dollars... A measure of success in this is all well enough... but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among [people].

Another overlap I offer is from Justo Gonzalez, who described in a way I'd never heard before how the Gospel temptation story overlaps the story of Adam in the Garden of Eden from Genesis. Gonzalez begins by observing that right before today's reading is a genealogy tracing from Jesus back through almost 80 generations, through David and Joseph and all, and the end of the line (or beginning) being "son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God."

Gonzalez, then, points out that both Adam and Jesus are called "son of God," and both are tempted exactly around that identity: Jesus tempted by the devil to prove it: "If you are the son of God..." and Adam told by the serpent that he could become like God, sowing doubt how he was already called son of God and was created in the image of God. Gonzalez observes that Adam and Jesus are both tempted by eating—Adam the fruit of the forbidden tree, Jesus to make a stone to bread when he was famished from fasting. Showing this is not a new idea and I probably should've heard it before, Gonzalez cites St. Ambrose from the 4th Century, that Adam was tempted in Paradise then expelled to the wilderness, while Jesus is tempted in the wilderness to restore us to paradise.

With these overlapping patterns, here are two quotes from Gonzalez: "From Luke's perspective the purpose of God is that Jesus will undo the harm that has ensued from the sin of Adam. Jesus will confront temptation as Adam did... As a result, his victory will be much greater than Adam's defeat."

And for the point that Jesus shares the victory with us, he writes: "For us, the most common temptation is not so much thinking too highly of ourselves, as it is accepting the low opinion that others have of us...and not trusting in the God after

whose image we have been created, and who will save and vindicate the divine image in us.”*

So. For whatever it’s worth, there you have the Gospel, Aldo Leopold, and Justo Gonzalez. I’m not sure how those overlap and fit with the rhythms of your life, and I’m not going to try to tell you.

You may take trials and temptations and picture Ahmaud Arbery’s killers or Russian war crimes. You may focus on what you’re battling personally, or a hard test coming up.

Or maybe you feel Jesus’ temptations are nothing like yours, and stick to his singularity of refusing to give in to what the world would want and his victory we share in Holy Week.

It may be that you find wilderness scary, a place of strange isolation, unsurprising you’d encounter evil there and fight against fearful beasts.

Or perhaps the reverse, with salvation in wildness, you may need those larger encounters of life, the rhythms that are sustained above and beyond our capacities or insights.

In the striving for “prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness” you may feel clear on what to avoid and figure you know the path to safety.

Or maybe what you thought you needed to get rid of would be better left alive and what you thought you could control would be better left to its own mystery.

You may feel encouraged to rise against the temptations of self-definition and exploiting power.

Or, in the end, when you’re tempted to prove yourself and show just how good you are, you may find it’s better to trust whom God has said you are, that you are a child of God, made in God’s image, never separate from God’s care.

* Luke, p56-62