

Walkabout

Luke 4:1-13

Among the indigenous peoples of Australia, there is a rite of passage that adolescent males undertake. This rite of passage is known as a Walkabout. The walkabout is a journey to help “transform” them into adults. During this journey, which can last for up to six months, the individual is required to live and survive all alone in the wilderness. In order to survive this long hike, the participant in the walkabout must be able to make their own shelter and must be capable of procuring food and water for themselves. They must learn to identify the difference between what can nourish them and keep them alive—and what can poison or even kill them. But the Walkabout is as much a spiritual journey as it is a physical one. It is a time for reflection and self-discovery. In its essence, this important aboriginal ritual is the ultimate survival test that a young person undergoes in order to enter adulthood. The person doing the walkabout should prove to the elders that he is capable of surviving the harsh environment of his native land.

The story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness might also be interpreted as a kind of Walkabout narrative. In Luke’s telling of the story the Devil’s temptations begin with, “IF you are the Son of God, then why not do this?” It might sound as though what the Devil is looking for is some evidence from Jesus to prove that he is God’s Son. But the sense of the word “if” in this passage is not interrogative. It is not asking “if” Jesus is who he claims to be. The Devil knew very well what the answer to that question was already. *If* Jesus is the Son of God, is never in question here, even for the Devil. A better understanding of what the Devil is up to is evident when we substitute the word “since” for the word “if.” The Devil tempts Jesus by saying, “SINCE you are the Son of God, why not do this?” Like, since you are the Son of God, you don’t have to be hungry. Just turn stones into bread. Or, since you are the Son of God, why wait forever for the world to recognize you, when I have the authority to get it done for you in a heartbeat, if you just trust my plans instead of doing it your Father’s way? And, since you are the Son of God, why not pull some showy stunt to prove it to everyone, instead of winning them over the hard way?

These three temptations were not tests for Jesus to prove whether or not he was the Son of God. They were ploys to trick him into betraying what it meant that he was God’s Son. But how Jesus demonstrated that he was God’s Son, was by taking on our human condition, with all the hungers, thirsts, risks and pains that come with that. He gave us a perfect image of his heavenly father, not by winning the world over to him through power and authority and deals with the devil, but through love and service to the world. He was true to who he was not by way of a grandstand demonstration of indestructibility—like surviving a swan dive from the heights of the Temple’s roof-- but through an epic moment of vulnerability, as he was hoisted up on a cross.

Jesus didn't fall for any of the Devil's tricks. And so, the Devil left Jesus until an *opportune time*. At an opportune time, the Devil moved Judas to betray the Son of God; once again putting before Jesus the tempting choice between sparing his own life from a painful end, or sacrificing himself to pave the way to eternal life for us all. The temptation to save himself from the cross or to do what he came to do, which is to save us. Again, Jesus made the faithful, not the expedient, choice.

Temptation was not a one-and-done test for Jesus. And it never is for us either. The temptations Jesus faced began when returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. In other words, his walkabout began right after he was baptized in the Jordan. And from the moment that you and I choose to walk the path of Christian discipleship that claims us at our baptism, we open ourselves up to a world of temptations that challenge us to be faithful or unfaithful to that call.

We might do well to think of the season of Lent as a kind of Walkabout that we reenter every year at this time. Not a physical journey, but a spiritual one. A time of intense personal reflection and self-discovery, possibly leading to a deeper spiritual maturity and a broader sense of our own humanity. A journey of identifying which choices nourish our relationship to Jesus and to our neighbors, and which choices poison our connection to Jesus and weaken the bonds that connect us to one another. A period of finding our shelter in Jesus' love for us instead of putting our trust in false and unreliable sources of security, as we trek through the sometimes-harsh terrain of life.

Just as they did with Jesus, temptations re-present themselves to us at opportune times. What do those temptations look like for us? Are they always temptations to do something we ought not do? Or, can they also be temptations to *not do* something that we should be doing? Like not giving assistance to someone in need when it is within our power to deliver some relief? Or maybe to not speak up to challenge injustice when our silence protects us but abandons the victims of those injustices?

May this Lenten season be as a walkabout to us. Not just a rite of passage to physical and emotional manhood or womanhood. But as an intentional journey, made in quest of a deeper discovery of what it means to be disciples of God's Son. *Since that is who we are.*

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