

Desert Journey

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Our readings from Scripture today are not much alike. You may have noticed, and wondered where the connection might be. Isaiah tells us that the desert will blossom, and that water will gush forth in the wilderness and "streams in the desert." Remember this: we will work our way back to this beautiful image. Matthew tells us of what must have been a terrible ordeal for Jesus - and the setting of this story is also the desert.

The Word is a marvelous narrative which teaches its lessons primarily with stories - a network of stories within stories, and the Lord Himself taught his disciples with stories, or parables. And so often, the images within these stories is of the desert; the wilderness. If our lives are journeys (and they surely are), there must be some parallels we can draw, from these stories to our own changing spiritual states.

Upon the birth of Isaac, we are told that Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, were sent into the desert of Beersheba to fend for themselves. Everyone knows of the wandering of the Children of Israel in the desert for forty long years. Elijah, before coming face-to-face with God, spent forty days in the desert, as some sort of preparation. The image of the desert appears and reappears in Isaiah's book of despair and hope for the nation of Israel. We read some of it today. And finally, the desert beyond the Jordan River.. the testing ground for Jesus, about to begin his great temptation.

So why the desert? The Writings for the New Church tell us that the significance of the desert (or wilderness) is found in its correspondence to a state of temptation. In the *Arcana Coelestia*, n. 6828, we read this:

For a "wilderness" signifies what is but little inhabited and cultivated, and also what is not inhabited and cultivated at all, thus in the spiritual sense a man vastated as to good and desolated as to truth, consequently a man who is in temptation; for he who is in temptation is in vastation and in desolation, because the falsity and evil in him come out and darken and almost take away the influx of truth and good from the Lord; and the truth which flows in does not appear to him to have sufficient life to disperse the falsities and evils. Moreover evil spirits are then present, who inject grief, and despair of salvation. That a

"wilderness" signifies such a state, is evident from the very many passages in the Word..

You see, this marvelous narrative of the Word, which in its entirety is the story of the human race's creation, fall, long struggle, and final triumph in the New Jerusalem, is *mostly* the story of the struggle. It begins in the third chapter of Genesis, and does not end until the twenty first chapter of Revelation. That's a lot of Bible; devoted to the struggle of mankind to get back to the Garden. And this struggle is often described for what it is - a time in the desert, the wilderness - "when falsity and evil come out and darken and almost take away the influx of truth and good from the Lord," when evil spirits are present.. to test the strength of our convictions.

And what of the frequent mention of the number forty? It must have some use to us, as often and consistently as it is used in the Word. It rained on Noah for forty days and nights. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all fasted for forty days in preparation for some significant spiritual event in their work. The spies of Israel spent forty days in the promised land, and Christ remained with the disciples forty days after His resurrection. The nation of Israel was led forty years in the desert until it was ready to enter the Promised Land. Again, from Swedenborg, we learn that the number forty lends important insight to our understanding of the Word:

That by "forty days and nights" is signified the duration of temptation, is plainly evident from the Word of the Lord. That "forty" signifies the duration of temptation, comes from the fact that the Lord suffered himself to be tempted for forty days. And as the things of instituted in the Jewish and other representative churches before the coming of the Lord were each and all types of Him, so also were the forty days and nights - in that they represented and signified in general all temptation, and specifically the duration of the temptation, whatever that might be. (*Arcana Coelestia*, n. 730)

So our theme this morning is the desert.. the testing ground.. for Israel forty years of it, and for Jesus, who was about to stand the world on its head *forevermore*. We shall see that this desert is a familiar place for us humans, but we shall also see that this desert, for all its desolation, despair, and *danger*, is the doorway into our salvation.

For without anxiety and despair, there can be no regeneration, and without regeneration there can be no New Jerusalem.

Let's get on to the story. It is another of those deceptive little ten verse sleepers buried all over the Gospels. What a fascinating habit of those writers, telling the biggest news in the smallest space! It appears in Matthew, which we read today, is virtually the same in Luke, but in Mark, the whole episode is summarized in an amazing *two verses*! You get the sense that he assumed we knew the story already, and he was on to other things. It says: "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." *Wild animals*. He is the only one to mention this. We will return to it, when we talk about correspondences.

The story is simple. *First*, it is linked with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. In fact, we will find that the two events must be considered together if we are to grasp the spiritual message here. *Second*, Jesus didn't just happen to wander out into the desert - he was *sent*, by the "Spirit of God" which had only recently descended on him at his baptism - he was sent by the Spirit to be tempted. *Third*, there were three great temptations he had to face: (1) "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered from the Word, "It is written: 'Man does not live by bread alone.'" (2) "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Jesus, again quoting the Word, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (3) "All this will I give you, if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus, answering from the Word again, said "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

Lastly in this story, it says that "the devil left him, until an opportune time. Who was this devil? We shall see..

And that's the story. But putting it into perspective, we are told that he abided there *forty* days. There's that number forty. It tells us of the importance of this narrative. It puts it in the spiritual big leagues, so to speak. And it reminds us to look at it (despite its brevity) very carefully.

This story, in its simplicity, speaks for itself. My plan is to allow it to do just that - *speak* - to me and to you, in such a way that we can carry it home and put it to use.

I have said that the temptation of Christ in the Desert must be considered linked with his baptism. The reason is not complicated: The teachings of our church have a lot to say about temptation. Far from the simplistic idea of enticement or seduction by evil alone, we are told that

temptation is a grand spiritual *process*, or exercise, by which our regeneration proceeds. Now we know that regeneration is the process by which we are born again, step-by-step into a new person, free from the evil and falsity we are born into. And it is by temptation that we take these steps. In the *Arcana*, n. 1787, we find that

Every temptation is attended with some kind of despair, and consolation follows. He who is tempted is brought into anxieties, which induce a state of despair as to what the end is to be. The very combat of temptation is nothing else. He who is sure of victory is not in anxiety, and therefore is not in temptation.

So temptation is defined as the continuous, ongoing struggle of our eternal lifetimes against evil, toward conjunction with the Divine. And it must begin with the illumination of our minds that there is good and that there is evil, and that we truly wish to be regenerated. This is reformation - the ordering of our thoughts toward good and the preparation to fight the battles (temptations) of regeneration.

This is our baptism - a sign and a memorial that our spiritual work has begun. And so did Jesus, coming out of nowhere, so to speak, step up to John and ask to be baptized. His destiny upon him, he felt an urgency to focus his energies for the great work ahead. As he was baptized, "heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting on him - and a voice from heaven said: 'This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" There can be no regeneration without great temptation, and there can be no temptation without a first spiritual step - for Jesus, the baptism to "fulfill all righteousness;" for you and me, the decision to follow the Lord.

Having made this momentous leap into his prophetic destiny, it remained for Jesus to find out what he was made of; who he really was. Something very strange had just happened to him: the power of the universe had just been placed in his hands for the battles ahead. God-on-Earth he was, but let's not forget that this Jesus was a man, nonetheless, and up to this time very likely a man much like you and me.

It is not hard to imagine the great anguish which must have followed his baptism as this new power over men and nature began to manifest itself within him. For along with this great power must have come awareness of the days ahead - and the cross at the end.

So the Spirit led him (where else?) to the desert - to sort it all out. And who he met out there, we really do not know. The Bible calls him the Tempter. What form he took is left up to our imaginations. Christian tradition would tell us he met a person; a being; a "dark god," of sorts, who would match wits with this new and powerful force on earth. But *our* church does not worship such a "dark god." Evil for us is more authentic and closer-to-home than that. It is within us. Mark, in his brief narrative, gives us the clue we need to visualize this experience. He said "He was with the wild animals," in that desert, remember? Beasts, we are told, correspond to things of Man's will or loves, to evil affections, cupidities and pleasures; to things which spring from the love of self and the pleasures of the world - the things we humans by nature hold so dear and have such trouble giving up. He met the Tempter all right. The same Tempter you and I meet every day. He met his Satan in the desert, just the same way. And the fight was on.

And what a fight it was. The tempter knew just where to hit him; just how to probe his soul for the weak spots - the human in this man who was trying so very hard to put his human away and assume the mantle of the Divine. There were three temptations in all: they were well chosen and covered all the bases. We shall see that they are the three elements central to all temptations, his, yours, and mine. In fact, if we recognize this, there are tools in this story to use in our own worst hours - for the beauty of Jesus is the example he left for us - *he has done the work* - shown us not only that it *can* be done, but *how*. I want to examine these three assaults on the Jesus, out there in that desert - analyze them a little, and I want to show you that in them is a lesson we can use when we find *ourselves* out there - alone, with the wild animals and the hunger and the danger of standing up close to the Tempter, who would destroy our souls.

"The Tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'" Jesus' answer was simple and direct: "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Note that this (and *all* his answers) come from Scripture - the Word, in this case the law of Moses. He did not need to form some new argument to counter the challenge. This man used the Word in his defense because, as John tells us, he *was the Word*, who "became flesh and dwelt among us." And what was the meaning of this challenge - to turn the stones to bread? Swedenborg tells us that in the Word, a stone represents natural truths, or truths

known to us through our senses and our intellect. Bread, however, corresponds to things celestial, which are spiritual and heavenly truths revealed. What the Tempter really said was this: If you are the Son of God, take these truths which you are to teach to these thick-headed humans and rather than waiting for them to find their own way to salvation with them, open their eyes and *make them see* the spiritual truths contained in them. Get it over with. You can do it - you have the power of heaven and earth in your hands.

What a great temptation. He knew what was ahead - hardship, scorn, torture, the unspeakable horror of the cross. Why not? Why not *make* the people see, and then they would surely all be saved. And the man in him must have cried out to be spared the cross. But it was not to be. We must have stones, and our salvation comes only as we, in complete freedom, turn these stones to bread by our own temptations.

Next the Devil took Jesus to the top of the great temple in Jerusalem - built on a cliff, with a drop of several hundred feet. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Now there was an ancient belief of the Jews that in fulfillment of that prophecy, the Messiah would announce himself by doing just what the Tempter was suggesting - he would leap off the highest point of the Temple and land unharmed. Easy work for the Son of God. And the easy way out for Jesus - to force the minds of men to believe what can only be believed by free and rational choice. And once again, the reward: no hardship, no betrayal, no cross. What a great temptation it must have been for this young man who was new at this Messiah business, and who must have been very unsettled and frightened about the whole thing. What a great temptation. Always, the easy way out. Jesus' answer, again from Moses, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Plain and simple: no free lunch - no blind faith for the human race any more. Those days were over, and there was, in him, a new covenant breaking in, which required it no more.

And last, the greatest temptation of all. The Tempter hit him with everything he had. What thing would any of us find the hardest to give away? What promise would likely appeal the most to the *human* in this fledgling Redeemer? "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this will I give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

What a great temptation. I am glad no one has ever made me that offer. *All the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor*. Imagine yourself in that situation. You *have* the power. It has been given to you "like a dove, descending from heaven", and lighting on you. You *know* you have the power. You know what you are supposed to do.. and it is going to *hurt*. The human in you says "Yes.. please.. yes." But the dove says no.

Gathering up all his courage and strength and newly acquired righteousness, Jesus *screamed* at this Tempter, "Away from me Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" Then the Devil left him, and angels came and attended him. Why angels? I am sure that only angels *could* have revived him after that last great struggle.

It is easy to read this story and miss its great significance. As Christ, the Divine Human, "the Word who was made flesh, to dwell among us," God on earth, our tendency is to see him as some sort of superman, with super powers, simply going through the motions of suffering and temptation, for the sake of fulfilling the Scriptures and making it all come out right. We must get beyond this. Jesus was a man. He was born just like you and me. He lived in this world just like you do. At some point the Divine began stirring within this man, and his process toward Glorification began. Only at the cross was this process completed. At all other times in the Gospels, we are observing a man in transition. We must never forget this. It is this fact which brings *life* to the life of Christ.

In this story of Christ's temptation - forty days in the desert - we must recognize the anguish, the desolation, and the loneliness he must have felt, because he was just beginning. He was you.. and me.. and he overcame the hells (as we like to say) to show us that we can do likewise.

So we have learned that there are three elements to great temptation. If we generalize those in this story to all our times of torment, anxiety, and pain, they can serve as rules to get us through. We have Jesus to thank for these rules. He suffered his forty days to help get us through ours. When we are on our journey through the desert, we have only to look to Christ for the peace which comes from knowing he was there before us. And then we look to our Church for the peace which comes from understanding what this process of temptation is all about. In times of great anxiety we must first remember: "Every temptation is attended

with some kind of despair.. and consolation follows. After the obscurity and anxiety of temptations, brightness and gladness appear."

The *pain* is our signal that we are being tested. If it is a great temptation, we should next look for its three faces - the three elements we find in our story of the Lord's temptation. By knowing that these will be present in some form, we can look for them, find them, and defeat them.

First, in any confrontation between good and evil, our first and strongest impulse will be to take the easy way out - to turn the stones to bread. This is the most basic of our human traits. Knowing this, and knowing that our regeneration depends on our doing what is right, not what is easy, we are encouraged to overcome.

Second, knowing that all of Providence works to the good, and knowing of the promises in the Word of our salvation by a loving God, do you just take yourself up to the top of the temple and throw yourself over? For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands." Many people do. They accept their fate, and let the Lord do the rest. Blind faith. Faith without works. No good. Temptation is a battle. Join it. Do your work. Keep plugging away, working *with* the Lord, but working nonetheless. Who ever said our regeneration was going to be easy?

Third, remember that the love of self, and love of the things this world can give us is a strong love indeed. It is strong enough to destroy us. In all temptation we are fighting to displace these with love of the Lord and the neighbor, and the love of what is good and true. It is war we must wage to overcome these things as our ruling loves, and there is great pain in it. But remember: **consolation and great peace will follow**. These loves, out of their proper order, are at the root of most great temptations. If we look for them we will find them. And we can defeat them, just as Jesus did.

This simple story of the forty days in the desert - simple in its style and brevity, but enormous in its spiritual significance, is ours to use. There are tools in it. There is hope in it, and there is a great victory in its message. The victory can be ours, because Jesus, through no small effort, overcame the same temptations which confront us all - the basic human conflict between choosing the evil of self-direction, or the eternal life of following the Lord. We have learned that to follow the Lord is not the easy way. It does not involve mindless blind faith. It requires great

work and can produce great pain at times. But it *can* be done, and there is eternal happiness in it if we do.

In closing, I want us to turn our minds to this image of the desert - barren, bleak, and desolate.

This is the landscape of our great temptations. Never, we are told, will the lord seem farther away than when we are journeying through this desert, paralyzed by the anxiety of the spiritual battles we must undergo. But *knowing* that the Lord is in fact *never closer*, and that he leads us every step of the way, this desert need not appear so forbidding. Let's return to the image from Isaiah:

"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.. it will burst into bloom.. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

AMEN

Lessons: Isaiah 34:16-35:10, Matthew 4:1-10, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13, Arcana Coelestia n. 6828, Arcana Coelestia n. 730