

## A JOURNEY INTO LENT

**TEXT:** Luke 4:1-13

I want to tell you about an experience I had a number of years ago. It was what today I might call a “transcendent moment”. I had signed up for a trip up the Amazon River—way up the Amazon River. Not just to the city of Manaus, which many of you will know as once being the elegant city built and populated by the wealthy rubber barons of Brazil, with a gorgeous opera house that at one time was viewed as one of the great venues of the opera world.

My adventure took me beyond that beautiful city. From the dock, a small group of us boarded a river boat and traveled to the tributaries of the Amazon. We then boarded canoes that took us to a small lodge deep in the jungle with no electricity or running water, where we would spend the next few days. On that first evening we boarded the canoes and, with our really macho guide we headed out into the jungle – hunting alligators. We all had our eyes glued toward the shore looking for those red eyes that would indicate that we had found our quarry.

As we sat quietly in that canoe, under the stars, hearing only the sounds of the jungle and a bit of lapping from the water, a strange feeling ran through my body and into my soul. It was a sense of disbelief in where I was and what I was doing. It felt as though time stood still and I was filled with a sense of belonging to eternity. The sense of awe that captured my soul still sends shivers down my spine.

This experience was a once in a lifetime thing. It was a journey into another space and time. And this is the feeling that comes from today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke. It is here that we are given our first glimpse of the real Jesus. As I was captured in my Amazon experience, so Luke wants to seize us unaware and captive in awe of this initial encounter with Jesus. Luke wants this encounter to shape our lives forever. Luke gives us a transcendental moment and leads us on our journey into Lent.

We begin our journey by being introduced to Jesus as an ordinary Jew, just one of the many people standing in line to be baptized by John. Yet this ordinary Jew from Galilee was about to move into an extraordinary experience that not only changed him – but changed history and the world. Immediately as he came out of the water, the heavens were violently ripped apart like a curtain. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended from heaven through the torn veil and landed upon Jesus.

It was then that we see the first transcendental moment in our story, as a voice resonates out of heaven, uttering a mere ten words: “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased!”

Suddenly the baptism of an ordinary Jew is transformed into a holy anointing of cosmic proportions. It is not often that Biblical history brings us the veil of heaven rent. Rarely are we so privileged to look into the heavens and hear that wondrous voice. Isaiah once prayed “O that Thou would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at Thy presence”. Well, here Isaiah’s prayer was answered and God provided the transcendental moment.

But the appearance of the Holy Spirit – the dove – was not the end of the moment. The voice of God rumbled from above, saying “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased!” This voice from heaven held great significance for Jesus. It drenched him in a sea of love before he even began to do anything. And it clarified his identity and his mission.

Then, before we can even catch our breath to take in the implications of all this, Luke thrusts us forward into another cosmic drama.

Once Jesus has been anointed by the Holy Spirit and affirmed by the Father, the Spirit immediately thrusts him into the wilderness where he must do battle with Satan. He will spend the next forty days in that wilderness, with Satan – that mocking, jeering, murderous being.

Now, Luke does not give us much detail about this forty-day journey in the company of wild animals. But we learn that Satan presented three tests or temptations for Jesus. I want to talk about these three challenges, because they parallel the testing that we as Christians inevitably face in our journey of life. Evil, difficult, things happen to good people, and we all face times of testing.

First of all, Satan challenges Jesus to turn stone into bread, to provide nourishment for his body. Don't we too, in our life journey need and want food when we are hungry? Bread – for Jesus and for us – is the symbol of food and money, the physical necessities of life. But Jesus knew that man could not live by bread alone. Jesus' need in the wilderness is our need today, not just to feed and fuel our bodies, but our minds and souls as well. Jesus' need in the wilderness is our need today.

Then Satan promised Jesus a miraculous rescue if he would throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Satan had heard the words that God would give the angels charge over him and guard him. But Jesus knew that it was not his place to tempt God so that Satan could have his way. We today still look for God to do “magical miracles” and rescue us from our foolish decisions.

Finally, Satan put the carrot of glory and authority through political power in front of Jesus. Those things would be his if we would bow before Satan and worship him. But, again, Jesus replied that “You shall worship the lord your God, and him only shall you serve”. We are tempted, as well, with the quest for glory, recognition and the authority of political power.

Very early into Jesus' journey he faced a time of testing. As we walk through our own journey into Lent we recognize again that we inevitably face times of testing. Evil things happen to good people. The power of these tests helps us to see what quality of genuine faith lives inside our hearts. We all know the numerous tests of life: a sudden battle with cancer, a heart attack, loss of a loved one, war, hunger, financial collapse, the

list goes on. But Jesus sets the example that shows us that the power of God is much stronger than the power of any evil or temptation in our lives.

The third leg of our journey takes us into the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the first two legs you may have noticed that Jesus was passive. He didn't do any mighty acts; he spoke very little. We saw the heavens being rent, the Spirit descending, the Father speaking. We saw Jesus thrust into the wilderness, demons tempting, angels ministering to him. Now we come to the beginning of a short, three-year ministry that will change the world.

The journey of teaching brings Jesus delivering the message that the kingdom of God has come near. Repent, he says, and believe the good news. Our six-week journey through the Lenten season provides a wonderful opportunity for our "refresher course" in the meaning of baptism and repentance. This is a time for us, as people of faith, to remember the meaning of being baptized into our faith and that from that day on you have become the song in God's heart, and God never forgets the song. This is the time to remember that the power of evil is forever testing us to draw us away from God, seeking to destroy and kill us physically, emotionally and spiritually. However, our Lenten journey reminds us that our faith in God, our faith in each other, our good values, good families, our good communities, our good nations and the goodness of God still live inside of us. God allows us to be tested; God allows us to be tempted. But we know that God is much stronger than the power of any evil in our lives.

Lent is about preparation. Remember when you were in school, you were required to pass certain tests before you could receive your diploma. There is an analogy here to today's message. God sent Jesus to graduate school to pass a symbolic test in preparation to be our guide. But God gave him his graduation gift a bit early. God gave Jesus the Holy Spirit as a gift, in the form of a dove, a beautiful symbol of innocence and gentleness and, yes, sacrifice. It was this graduation gift that gave him the strength to stand up to the temptations of his wilderness experience even as that same Spirit ministers to us in our wilderness experiences.

As I sat in that small canoe in the darkness of the Amazon jungle, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit; that sense that this was a special moment in my life that would be with me forever. This is what a transcendental moment is – it is a leg on that journey from baptism, through the wilderness, to our place of ministry to the world. This is what our Lenten journey will be as we study and learn and pray, looking ahead to the cross, and then to the empty tomb. Amen.