

VISION QUEST: GARDENS AND DESERTS

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Australian Aborigines called it "Going Walkabout." Native Americans spoke of venturing out on a Vision Quest. It can take place out in a desert, up on a mountain, or deep inside a cave. It can happen in a sweat lodge, under a grove of old growth cedars, or inside a quiet chapel.

Anthropologists who have studied myriad tribal cultures know that during times of major transition, remarkably similar ritual practices take place and have always taken place all over the world.

The Lakota Shaman, Lame Deer, tells his story: "I sat there in the vision pit, all by myself, left on the hilltop for four days and four nights without food or water. If Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, would give me the vision and the power, I would become a medicine man and perform many ceremonies.

The Aramaic culture of Jesus' day was a traditional Native tribal culture too. And I'm convinced that Jesus, when he went out into the wilderness and was tempted, went out on a kind of Vision Quest. Jesus experienced a "Wandering" in the ancient tribal sense of the word. During the symbolic forty days and nights in which he wandered, Jesus re-membered the symbolic forty YEARS of wandering that his ancestors experienced in the wilderness. That Old Testament Exodus saga was definitely a Wandering story, the Vision Quest of a whole people. The Exodus saga probably relates more directly to today's Jesus story about wandering in the desert than does the story about Adam and Eve, although both of these temptation stories, if we hear them well, can be appropriately re-membered together.

One of our main tasks as Christians, after all, is "to RE-member stories that have been DIS-membered." (Chad Meyers) So when we try to take a fresh look at the Adam and Eve story, for instance, we might discover that the whole of known creation was this wonderful garden. And all of it – the apple, the snake, the woman, the man, even humanity's very nakedness itself – had already been declared good! All of creation was part of God's body. So of course there was no shame. And of course there was no need for the season of Lent either, no need to confess any sins, no need for a Vision Quest. Why go wander about when you're already exactly where you're meant to be, in God's Garden? But what temptation does is confuse us. And that tree of knowledge of good and evil does not actually enlighten us about good and evil in the long haul, it overwhelms and confuses us with excessive data. So we get the basic story all mixed up. We lose all the sense of clear boundaries. Then life, which once was Paradise itself, becomes a kind of Limbo instead, a place of confusion. American Indians and other traditional peoples speak of an otherworldly Wandering Ground too, a kind of Limbo or Purgatory where, if one had not seen one's Vision, if one had failed the Wandering test while alive and young, one went for at least one year after death. The spirit of the departed then has to wander restlessly in this place for a while, in a way, doing penance for what failed to come about during one's own lifetime. Maybe we all have to go through such times of confusion and wondering about. But I suspect that it's better to get through it while we're still here on earth. Thankfully, all kinds of religious traditions have developed ways to help us to just that, to get-the-hell through and then out of our confusion and our despair.

The Matthew story makes mention of Satan, and of very specific kinds of temptations; I'm not attempting to address all of these in this particular sermon. But let me just mention this: in the ancient Jewish world, Satan did not represent pure evil. Rather, he was one of God's ministering angels. More like that friend you may have had as a teenager who always

egged you on, who helped you get into your own fair share of trouble. He was, in other words, a kind of 'devil's advocate' representing the energy and exuberance of the rebellious spirit, and pushing you on to learn, to think, or to do something that might be beyond your comfort zone. Such learning can indeed be uncomfortable, even painful, and yet ultimately, something valuable, something good.

And **as we venture outward**, we see the desert, the Spirit wilderness.

There we face into our temptations;

the trail winds and gets quite narrow,

but eventually, we come back to things wide and spacious – green and glorious.

In gardens of the Spirit, we have to dig deep;

in deserts of the Spirit, we have to venture far.

Lent is a pathway from one garden to another,

From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane,

and then at Easter to yet another:

to the garden which contained

the empty tomb, an angel, and a risen Christ.

Jesus went out on a kind of Vision Quest. He did it to get himself, to get us all, back to the garden.

Our verses from Matthew for today start and conclude with assurances that we'll make it back. Jesus is led out there in the first place by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by Satan, and once out there, facing those dangers and temptations, Angels of God wait on and watch out for him.

In some ancient tribal traditions, elders carefully guarded an important secret from their young. So when an adolescent youth – usually it was a boy – went out all alone overnight to some dangerous wilderness place as part of his ritual passage into adulthood, he would be blindfolded. And each youth would assume that he was facing the dangers and demons and howling wild creatures of the night all alone. But in fact, his grandfather would be secretly stationed nearby to guard and protect him from beasts of prey.

Lent is a journey that has a purpose, that goes in a direction – from death to life.

And for Christians, that may help us understand where the season of Lent comes in for us. Because what it does for us at its best is to provide a structure of sorts to go off a-Wandering, to face our demons and devil's advocates, to confess our confusion, to seek new clarity, to be egged-on, to re-member our dis-membered stories all over again.

"The Lord formed a human being from the dust", the creation story starts right out telling it, and as Joanni Mitchell put it to song, "We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." It is **the universal longing of all Creation** to get back to the garden!

The Bible itself begins and ends in a garden, starting in Genesis, and ending in Revelations of Resurrection. Some say it only contains stories, including a creation myth or two; well maybe so. But our stories are pretty much all we have to help us make it through. Our storyline assures us that yes we can, *si se puedes*, we can make it through, because we know from our stories that long after Adam and Eve got busted, and ended up outside of the garden, Moses and Miriam and Jesus and so many others made it through their deserts, back to the garden. They faced their demons, and so can we. Lent helps us out. (It's a bit

like preparations for a new election!) And since we simply have to get ourselves back to the garden, Lent comes in rather handy. Lent leads us through and eventually out of our confusion. It **provides a structure** of sorts for us to go off a-Wandering, to seek new clarity, to re-member our dis-membered stories anew, and to find our way home again.

Or to put it another way: the vocation of a Christian during Lent is to be both a sojourner and a gardener, both a traveler and a digger – *to dig down in the depths of our innermost being and to venture out along edges of the outermost places to which God calls us.*

As we venture into deep earth inner gardens of the Spirit,
we sweat and get calloused, but our labor bears fruit.

So in the season ahead of us, I challenge us all as a Christian tribe, to **take leave for a while of our favorite places, our comfortable homes and carefully-tended gardens, and head out with Jesus into the wilderness.**

We pray we might, as Jesus did, have angels waiting upon us there, and in all our wilderness sojourns, in both gardens and deserts of our lives, we might, with courage intact, confront our demons and overcome them. Let it be so, Amen.