

The Initiation of the Lad.

Ross Scott
Oct 2020

His Mum has been fussing around him all morning. At last the Lad gives her a hug. Holding him tight she asks if he is sure he is ready - he could wait for another year. His dad looking on from behind his wife nods affirmation that it is time. The boy heads off towards the Jordon River following a path others have walked before.

Putting down the bag his mum had given him, with this morning's bread, he walks out into the water. As he waits in line he thinks of his life to date. The things he is proud of and the things he would rather not remember.

In his turn he is lowered into the water, trying to hold his breath, he does as his father told him. He says a prayer of turning aside from his childish ways and all that he has done that has brought shame on him and his household.

The waters fold around him. He soaks in the water, the first step in the transition. His childhood is being left behind. Washed, he breaks the surface and looks into the eyes of his baptiser, winking a message of appreciation.

Then with the anticipation and the excitement of the next 40 days welling up in him he wades confidently through the river and heads for opposite shore.

Resting in the warmth of the late afternoon with the sunshine drying his body he looks back to the western shore, to the sun setting on the past, the place of his childhood, the village, the carpentry workshop, the olive grove and vineyards. And then he sees on the other bank the little bag with the loaf of his mum's bread. A 'panic' shivers through his spine. He thinks of his mum and the comfort and security of home.

No sooner has the shiver settled than a dove descends and sits on a branch just above his head. He picks up a stone to throw at the dove, as he would have done as a child. But then he stops and holds his stone, looking at the dove instead.

.....

The baptiser smiled, the dove having confirmed what he had felt in the water. This young man had a blessing on his life!

An elderly man approached and beckoned for the boy to follow. Out into the wilderness they walked with the last rays of sun on their backs. The Lad passed the stone from one hand to the other. And so the 40 days began.

The elder spent a lot of time in silence. He would watch a bird scraping in the ground, or a trail of ants marching, marching, marching. He would inspect some date palms, eyeing the fruit till one day he saw they were ready. He watched the clouds and was right when he said rain was on the way. The old man showed the Lad how to follow small animals to a hidden water hole among the rocks. They gathered locusts to eat. (An acquired taste).

The elder showed him how the bees pollinated the flowers and how to follow a bee to the hive. Honey was more to the Lad's liking - sweet, filled with the flavour of the wild flowers.

One day they killed a small animal. The elder gave thanks to the animal for its life and the gift it was making to their evening meal.

The elder talked of the old stories in the evenings. Of the Garden of Eden and why Adam had left the garden. What was the knowledge he gained from the tree that led him out, away from the garden to the land that surrounded it?

They talked of rainbows, the flood, and why God had warned the animals to fear Man as they left the Ark?

They talked of the wars, the kings, and conflict. The elder always asking the Lad why?? Who really owns land? Do men own the land or does the land own men?

He asked questions about the boy's relationship with the Samaritans and the Canaanites? About the Egyptians and the Syrians, the Romans and Greeks?

He asked what the Lad thought about the place his mother had in their home compared to his father. The place his sisters had compared to him?

And the elder asked each day what the Lad had learned about the wilderness, the land, the interconnection of the animals and plants. The significance of the sun and the rain, the wind, the frost by night and the scorching heat by day.

Often at the end of the evening the elder would ask what he knew of God and on this the Lad had a lot to say. Moses and the commandments. Deliverance from Egypt, God being with the Israelites in Babylon, the victories achieved when Israel placed their trust in God. On this subject the boy showed no uncertainty. God was to be trusted. God would look after the faithful. There was nothing his God could not do. It was clear he had taken the studying of the Torah seriously, the psalms and the prophets.

Each day the Lad held his stone, and as the days turned to weeks he thought of his home and comfort of his bed, his friends, the rhythm of each day, things familiar. He enjoyed the slowness of the wilderness but he missed the activity of home.

At times he discovered his mischievous child was still with him. He jumped and played around the rocks, frightening a mouse trapped at the back of a cave.

After a meal of locusts and honey he would think of his mother's cooking and at times he could almost remember the smell of her fresh baked bread.

By the end of the 40 days he was ready to return home. Ready to meet his father as a man and start working in the workshop. To the Lad there was no more to be learnt of the wilderness, or the desert. The thought of his mother's bread was at the forefront of his mind.

As the Lad sat with the elder in the shade on that final day, the elder reached over and took the stone from the boy's hand. He fiddled with it in his fingers for a while.

Then he asked:

Can you turn this stone into bread?

Can you make this place home?

Can you find your place in the wilderness?

Can you be part of it?

Do you see it sustains you?

Can you see this stone is your bread?

After 40 days in the wilderness the boy replied, ‘no. I belong in civilisation; I belong and depend on God for my substance. God will sustain me on the other side of Jordon. I will live by what God says’.

The elder said nothing for a while and then said follow me. They walked to the Jordon, crossing through it and leaving the desert and wilderness behind. They passed the small bag of now stale bread. They walked towards Jerusalem, past the outer court yard where the women gathered and on into the temple. The elder led the Lad to the top of the temple. They looked out on the city, the centre of civilisation as the Lad knew it. They saw the gardens that surrounded it, all that the Lad was familiar with.

Then he said, “You have told me night after night that you trust in God and earlier today you talked of your trust in everything God has said so now you can jump. The Torah says

“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.”

Just as the Lad knew the laws of Torah he also knew the laws of nature. Gravity still worked in the city. Gravity was here.

The wilderness was still here in the city. Civilisation had not overcome the power of the wilderness, and even if the Lad through his people would kept trying to master the wilderness, it was still powerful.

And so rather than jump or own up to the cloud of doubt within him he called on the words of Moses - **do not put the Lord your God to the test.**

The elder was at last getting through to the Lad. The blind faith and superiority of the civilised world was being challenged. But the Lad was not yet ready to admit it.

And so the elder lead the Lad back down the stairs, out past the women’s court yard and through the city with its beggars and grand houses, Samaritan traders and Roman soldiers, past the olive groves and beyond the flocks of sheep and goats in the hills . They climbed up into the mountains and on the way the Lad was able to see the natural world in its natural state. From the top of the mountain they were able to look out.

The elder, still holding the stone, pointed out to the wilderness. The oceans, the deserts, the rain forests, the arctic frozen tundra, the ice fields of Antarctica and even three island in the South Pacific devoted to bird life.

He looked the Lad in the eye, holding his gaze he said, “If you are prepared to bow down and humble yourself, if you are able to see yourself as one with all the ecosystems of the world, if you are able to see that you are dependent on them, that the wilderness is not committed to you but you are dependent on it for all that gives

you life, if you can see that continuing to have dominion over it, as you continue to exploit it, as you continue to use its resources, you will lose everything. But if you will bow down before it, acknowledging your place in it, not over it, then it will all be yours. You need the wilderness, but the wilderness does not need you”.

And the Lad left the elder, returning home, not sure of how he got there and was deeply disturbed by all that had been said - confused. In the morning he woke and his stone was in his hand and the smell of his mother's bread filled the house.

The Lad worked for his father and dwelt on these things. He thought about the elder, the wilderness, what trust in God really meant and what his place in the world was.

With time he started to talk of what he was discovering and came into conflict with Pharisees and Sadducees - the rich and the powerful. He became a champion of the poor, women and Samaritans. He even discovered that a Roman could have faith.

When the going got tough he would take the stone out of his pocket and rub it. He would return to the wilderness to pray, to just be.

When he entered Jerusalem that last time, the crowds shouted hosanna and the pharisees called him to silence them. He was able to say with confidence that if the crowd were silent then the stones would cry out. The stones would cry out!

And it is said that on the night before he was killed for his shocking attitude to the established order of the temple and

society, he returned to a garden, he returned to his connection with the natural world, to be reunited to the wilderness, the elements of the land. He needed the wilderness.

But the stories that would be told of the Lad in the years to come would not treat his time in the wilderness as a time of enlightenment but rather as a time when the devil tried to lead him astray. And any call to respect the environment would be lost from the stories of his life except the short references that he would go back out into the wilderness to pray. Oh and yes, one of the gospels, Mark's, did say 'take the message of salvation to the whole of creation'.

Having told this story I invite you to consider if it is possible that Jesus might have been concerned that we not only restore our relationships with each other, between genders and nations, that we address inequalities, bring healing and comfort to those in need, but also that we be restored in our relationship with the environment.

Might we consider that Jesus was concerned for a restoration of our relationship with the environment? That the break that occurred in the Garden of Eden might have a path to healing, that we might humble ourselves before all the Kingdoms of the world from the arctic to the tropics, mountain tops and down the great rivers to the sea,

from desert to rainforest
and even to three south pacific islands devoted to birds.

That if we confess our abuse of the planet, and her wildernesses
and see ourselves as one species among many, would this bring
salvation?

I increasingly believe that salvation includes restoring my
relationship with the land - the Planet and this comes with
humility.

Because as the elder said we need the wilderness. The wilderness
does not need us.

(Copy right: Ross Scott)