

Text: *Exodus 17:1* From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, . .

### **FROM THE WILDERNESS OF SIN: CAMPING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS**

I really enjoy camping. I have camped out over most of the U.S., a sizeable portion of Canada and, except for one state, all of Australia. As an academic I could either take my summers off or I could teach and make additional money. I always took off on three month camping trips. Odd how my children, in their adulthood, have never gone camping. Well, there was one exception, my daughter visited me in Australia and I promptly took her on a camping trip from Adelaide to Darwin.

Wilderness camping was always the best. Whether by backpack or with a tent, forest, mountain or desert, all of it was welcomed. But I have never really thought about camping out in the wilderness of sin. Usually we associate wilderness with solitude, but in the wilderness of sin there is plenty of company, all of human kind.

**The Devil made me do it:** A black comedian of many years ago, Flip Wilson, had a reason for every bit of sinning he did. He always said “The Devil made me do it.” Thus comforted, he then went about his business. It is a comforting statement. If the Devil made me do it, then I am not really entirely responsible for my actions. It is a notion that is somewhat in conflict with the “proper” view of free will, but it is persuasive. In Biblical mythology the devil is portrayed as a mighty figure, almost God, who causes havoc on earth and individual temptations to participate in sins of one kind or another. With such a mighty figure aiding and abetting our sinning it is no wonder that we succumb so often. No wonder that we all are camping out in the wilderness of sin.

I have always found the devil made me do it theology a bit too cute, far too much like an excuse for sin, rather than an acknowledgement of the sinful nature of humans. Speaking personally, I have always found myself ready and willing to sin without any external devil egging me on! I am quite competent to sin on my own, thank you. I don’t need the devil’s help.

**The nature of sin:** Perhaps my problem with the devil is caused by my belief in the nature of sin. To me, sin is very simply whatever actions or thoughts separate us from God. They may be of a profound nature or a mundane nature. The important element is that somehow, they lessen one’s ability to communicate and feel the presence of God. These elements are all relative. At the ridiculous end of the continuum is the story of the rabbi, the catholic priest and the Episcopal priest having a chat in hell. The Episcopal priest asked each one why they were in hell. The Catholic priest said, I ate meat on Friday, the rabbi explained that he loved bacon. When it was the Episcopal priests turn to explain why he was in hell he said, “I used the salad fork on the main course.” Different things separate different people from God’s communion.

And, those things change. There are the sins of the young and the sins of the old. We oldsters all love to discuss the sins of youth. Those are interesting and make for good reality tv and romance novels. It is so easy to feel morally superior to the young who sin. Of course, the sins of the old may affect many more people and in much more adverse ways. They are the

sins of power and ego. So, the young may lust, but we oldsters may combine lust with power and ego in such a manner as to destroy many lives. As we grow older our sins tend to have consequences that are more societal than individual. But, young or old, physical lust or power lust, all are barriers to our relationship with God.

**Restorative Redemption:** Lent is the celebration of the removal of those barriers to our relationship to God. Jesus is the vehicle for God's grace that removes sin from the human-God equation. I like to call this dynamic, restorative redemption. It is a redemption that not only removes barriers, but recreates the innocence and wholeness of our communion with God. This is not an instant of being "born again," but, rather, a lifelong process of renewal. Since we are constantly sinning, we are also constantly being renewed. This is not to say, as the Roman Catholic joke goes, that we are under an obligation to sin so that we might enjoy and benefit from, the wonders of the sacrament of Penance. As we are restored in faith and spirit, we should find an improvement in our earthly behavior. As the barriers fall which our actions have erected, the meaningfulness and power of our spiritual selves should be better manifested. In short, we should become better human beings!

**Conclusion:** In Lent we meditate on sin and death; frequently waiting until Easter to celebrate the Risen Christ. But sin and life are so inextricably fused together in our everyday lives, that I think we should think of them together. We should always remember that it is all about building our relationship to God. We do that in many ways, but all ways rely on God's grace and our free will. So, we will continue our campout in the wilderness of sin. But the wilderness will not conquer! Today's Gospel of *John* says it best: "But the hour is coming, and is now here; when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." Amen.