

## The Pain of Stolen Honey

A painful price is paid when one reaches his hand into a swarm of bees to swipe some of their honey. Stingers fly and welts flare. Wild honey is not collected from wild bees without burning pain and suffering. Today there is protective equipment and methods to harvest honey, but in times past it took a man willing to experience bitter pain today for the sweet rewards later.

There seems to be a principle built into the real world that is expressed with maxims such as “good things take time,” and “no pain no gain.” A paycheck is preceded by forty hours of work. Muscles appear after weeks of sweat equity and exercise. Shortcuts seldom pay off and if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Achievement takes effort and rewards are given to those who work hard.

Suffering is shunned by most people. Pain is avoided. We usually chose the path of least resistance. It seems most people are hard-wired for pleasure, relaxation and personal gratification. Following these baser impulses rarely reap the rewards human beings aspire to.

The number *forty* is used symbolically in the Bible over and over again. Jewish and Christian tradition has known this from the beginning. Forty is the number of testing, suffering, fasting, repentance and self-denial. It often precedes new beginnings and new stages of salvation and restoration. Noah’s flood lasted forty days, Israel wandered in the wilderness forty years, Jonah gave Ninevah forty days to repent, Elijah fasted forty days and nights—as did Jesus in the wilderness.

John the Baptist wandered in the Judean Wilderness east of Jerusalem. He wore rustic clothing and suffered the pain of harvesting his own wild honey. He ate his wild honey with locusts, another word for a grasshopper. Such hopping insects were declared “clean” foods for the Jews (Lev 11:22). I once jokingly told a group of pilgrims I “loved living the Bible in the Holy Land” and if they found a grasshopper I would eat it like John the Baptist had done. They went on a mission and found a 4” wiggly grasshopper. I had no choice but to imitate the Baptist.

In the summer months the wilderness of Judea hovers around 120°. John looked and acted a lot like Elijah the prophet and it was from this exact location that Elijah was assumed body and soul into heaven. No wonder the Pharisees questioned if John was the Elijah who was to come. He was baptizing repentant Jews about thirty miles down from the mountains of Jerusalem and about three miles from the ancient community of Qumran. John undoubtedly associated with these devout Essenes who had moved to the hot wilderness to seek God and become the Children of Light. The wilderness, like the number *forty*, is usually associated with seeking God and a sincere holiness brought about by self denial and isolation.

Christian tradition from the earliest times understood the spiritual benefits of established periods of fasting, repentance, prayer and self-denial. This practice of self abandonment

to the wilderness for forty days was incorporated into the liturgical year. It was called Lent. The word originates from an old English word meaning “spring” and was used because Lent, the time of fasting and prayer was practiced in the spring of the year in preparation for Easter.

John the Baptist wandered in the wilderness to mortify the flesh and earthly desires, focusing his mind and heart on things above. He was seeking holiness and spirituality. Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the same wilderness to be tempted by the Devil and prepared for his ministry. The Church wants us to share in this deeper life of God. Lent is a time set aside so that we can join John in the wilderness—setting aside the distractions of daily life and earthly pursuits, turning to God and prayer.

Of course it is not as easy for most of us since we have families, work schedules, diapers to change, houses to clean and on and on. The Lord and the Church understand this completely. But even the daily service of a family, the quality labor provided on the job and extra love shown to others can be an act of penance and self-giving. We can all fit in time for confession, a bit more prayer and spiritual readings, deny ourselves a few extravagances or pleasures and seek to get closer to God. It is never easy—it wasn’t for John, Jesus or others who wandered for forty days looking for a deeper walk with God and a richer human experience.

We buy honey in the store and few of us like John are willing to reach into a hive and grab the honey at great cost. But like John we can impose a bit of self-denial upon ourselves, entering into penance, prayer, repentance and self-denial—though it often feels like reaching for the honey. The minimal pain of Lent can bring about the sweetness of holiness.

These places in the desert still exist. We can walk through the ruins of Qumran, see the mist over the Dead Sea and the mountains of Moab in Jordan and stand on the shore of the River Jordan at the place Jesus met John after his forty days of temptation when he stepped out of the wilderness to have the Holy Spirit descend upon him. No prayer or sacrifice, no self denial or charitable act will go unnoticed by God. The sweetness of the Spirit will certainly be our reward.