

“Led by the Spirit into the wilderness...”
Reflections on Lent, Jesus’ Temptations and Indigeneity
by Ched Myers

“And Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days...”
--Luke 4:1f

“Without wildness, civilization could not survive. The converse does not hold.”
--Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden*

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I. Introduction: On “Walkabout” in Australia

SUNRISE IN A CAMPING GROUND IN DENILIQVIN, in northeast Victoria, Australia. I awoken to a cacophony of screaming cockatoos and galahs, a manic morning-song chant of praise. Outside the tops of the gum forests are turning bronze, leaves fluttering in the soft breeze of dawn like a thousand Tibetan prayer-flags. Surrounded by beauty, I reflect on the quiet epiphany that occurred yesterday.

Our group had stood under the canopy of a different gum tree forest on the riverbank across town. We were listening to UCA Aboriginal leader Vince Ross as part of a February 2002 Uniting Church of Australia Commission for Mission delegation that spent a week on a “Walkabout” tour of Aboriginal communities in northeast Victoria. Vince was telling his story of growing up in a fringe-dweller’s camp on this very spot, a place of bittersweet memory that he called “Gumtree Lane.” Vince’s moving tale bore poignant witness to racist violence and exclusion—and to courage and survival. He spoke of drunken brawls and extraordinary kindnesses, of gnawing hunger and comforting music—and of being touched by the Spirit at age twelve. At the end of his testimony, he went to the site where the old shed of a church had stood. He bent down and drew a series of concentric circles in the sand, with linear marks extending to each of the Four Directions. “This is our symbol for a corroboree—a gathering of the people,” he explained quietly, tears trickling down his cheeks. “You know, after all we Koori people have been through—we are still here”...

This Walkabout was part of the UCA's "Unfinished Business" campaign concerning Aboriginal justice. Elaine (a Canadian) and I (an American) were invited because we share the same concerns about the historical legacy of genocide and continuing marginalization of indigenous peoples in our own respective countries. Each of us on the delegation was trying to reckon with the painful legacy to which Vince's story testifies. It is the past that haunts our present, what American writer Wendell Berry refers to as the great "hidden wound."

Whether or not we acknowledge or attend to it, we carry its long psychic and social shadow in our bones, if in different ways. As Native American Wendy Rose wrote during the 1992 Quincentenary of Columbus' landing in the Americas:

Nothing of the past five hundred years was inevitable. Every raised fist and brandished weapon was a choice someone made. The decision to become a nation of thieves and liars was a choice. The decision to censor the native truth was a choice. The decision to manipulate the knowledge of...history was a choice... I do not vanish. I do not forget. I will not let you forget.

The same sobering point was made 150 years ago by the great Indian Chief Sealth Suquamish, who warned conquering European Americans that: "At night, when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and deserted, they will throng with the host that once filled, and still love, this land; the white man will never be alone."

There is only one path to resolve this legacy: to excavate it, to confront it, and to figure out together how to make things right. As the motto of the remarkable South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission put it: "Without truth, no healing; without forgiveness, no future."

In trying to put this Walkabout in a wider theological and political context I offered the following reflections with our delegation during an outdoor Eucharist in Mildura. Since our Walkabout took place just after Ash Wednesday, I looked at the traditional scripture for the first week of Lent, Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, trying to "read" this text through a lens that takes the work of "Unfinished Business" seriously.

It has been three years since our Walkabout, and we have arrived again at Lent. I offer these reflections to all those struggling to "repair the Sacred Hoop"—or in the words of the great African American folksong, to "keep the Circle Unbroken."

II. Jesus on a Vision Quest : Exodus or Egypt?

THE CHURCH TRADITIONALLY inaugurates Lent by reflecting on the "wilderness temptations" of Jesus. This story is articulated most fully in Matthew 4:1-11 (= Lk

4:1-13; I will follow Luke's version). In preparation for his mission, Jesus follows a mysterious yet compelling calling to radical wilderness solitude. He fasts. He lives in the wild. He wrestles with spirits.

Jesus' desert retreat seems strange to our modern ears, and consequently has been ignored or relentlessly spiritualized or psychologized in churchly interpretation. It bespeaks, however, of an ancient practice that is quite intelligible to indigenous peoples the world over. Largely lost to contemporary urban cultures, this tradition survives still among most land-based tribal peoples. Among Aboriginal people it is referred to as "going Walkabout," what elder Guboo Ted Thomas describes as the "renewal of the Dreaming." For the California Yuki it is dancing and the sweat lodge. The Pueblo people of New Mexico follow the ancient traditions of the kiva. And the Sioux name it hanblechia—the vision quest.

The vision quest is a ritual passage into selfhood, somewhere between what Joseph Campbell calls the "initiation ceremony" and the "hero-journey." Shamans, writes Christopher Vecsey, "with the help of guardian spirits travel to the land of the dead in order to restore the lost or stolen or diseased souls...out of love for their community." The classic literary account of a Lakota shaman, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, opens:

I sat there in the vision pit...all by myself, left on the hill top for four days and 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.

This is both a very real exterior adventure beyond the margins of society and an interior passage of cleansing. Yet the journey to/in the "spirit world" is also a sojourn through mythic time, in order to encounter the story and destiny of one's self and one's people.

That this sojourn lasted "forty days" (Lk 4:2) is clearly intended to invoke Israel's forty-year wanderings in the wilderness after Egypt. But what exactly is the connection? Jesus is somehow interiorizing the experience of his people, but not in the sense that modern religious existentialists understand it. I would suggest instead that he is mystically re-tracing the footsteps of Israel in order to discover where the journey of his nation went wrong.

Jesus believes that his people have lost their bearings, and that course-correction can only come through a kind of "re-visioning" of the fateful choices that led liberated Israel back into captivity. This Walkabout is, in other words, seeking a

radical diagnosis that moves beyond symptoms to the root-causes of the historical crisis of his people.

To begin this formidable task Jesus must return to beginnings, confronting his people's "myth of origins." For Israel, this was the Exodus wilderness, so it is there that Jesus must journey "in the spirit." (It is no accident that the temptation narrative follows hard on the heels of a traditional ancestral genealogy in Luke; see 3:23-38). Israel's distinctive identity commenced when they were sprung by Yahweh from Pharaoh's imperial straight jacket: "I will bring My people out of Egypt" (Ex 3:10). Similarly, in the gospel story Jesus' distinctive identity has just been confirmed at his wilderness baptism by John: "You are My child, the Beloved" (Lk 3:22). Now Jesus, like his ancestors, must struggle in the wilderness to discover afresh what this vocation means.

The temptations here, as in the Old Story, represent a fundamental test of this primal identity. "If you are the child of God..." taunts the Devil in refrain (Lk 4:3,9). This is the question Jesus—and the Church that is invited to follow in his footsteps in Lent—must answer: Are we as a people still defined by the Exodus journey, or have we abandoned it? Literally hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible the community is exhorted to remember this liberation from slavery; indeed, the God of Israel is known not so much as Creator as the One "who brought you up out of Egypt" (some 25 times in Deuteronomy alone). This memory is meant to function as a warning to the people not to practice the former lifeways of imperial captivity (Lev 18:2-3), or what Walter Wink calls the "Domination System." Israel must "never return that way again" (Dt 17:16).

Indigenous people understand far better than we that the "bush" is precisely the place to examine the way we have internalized the pathologies of empire. The wild spaces of nature represent a mirror to us to see how domesticated under "civilization" we have become. In this wilderness mirror we can more clearly see how Satan has lured us into all the other narratives that constantly compete with the biblical one for our allegiance. And the myths of Pharaoh and Caesar and Bush, of the National Security Council and the television news, of Wall Street and Hollywood, are seductive indeed. They promise prosperity, power, and prestige — but deliver only captivity. Jesus knows he can resist these imperial delusions only by staying grounded in the old Story. Hence his counter-refrain: "It is written..." (Lk 4:4,8,12).

The gospels re-narrate the Exodus journey as the "Way" of discipleship (Mk 1:2-4)—and this Way begins with Jesus' vision quest in the wilderness. The three temptations he faces there, in turn, name the archetypal characteristics of the Domination System: the economics of exploitation (Lk 4:3), the politics of empire (4:5f), and the symbolism of omnipotence (4:9-11). Interestingly, Luke's ordering of these

temptations corresponds, in reverse order, to the first three petitions of his version of the Lord's Prayer:

May Your Name be hallowed;
May Your Kingdom come;
Give us each day enough bread (Lk 11:1-4).

Moreover, Jesus re-enacts these same three themes in the course of his ministry, offering them as object lessons to his disciples, as we shall see.

Jesus' vision quest is, in other words, no minor skirmish in the desert. It articulates the central issues with which the people of God always struggle in their journey of faith and liberation. I believe these issues have not changed for the church in our time; they represent the "unfinished business" to which we must attend still.

III. "Enough bread for today": Manna or Mammon?

JESUS STANDS, IN THE MYTHIC MOMENT of vision quest, at the point of Israel's origins: in the wilderness, surrounded by nothing but the barren rock of the Judean desert. Like his ancestors, he hungers, and is understandably anxious about bread (Lk 4:3). Exodus, like Walkabout, means to face the sometimes harsh realities of life outside the "imperial incubator." This is the first test of free Israel's character, and reveals that, as the old African American proverb puts it, "It is easier to get the people out of Egypt than to get Egypt out of the people":

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron..."Would that we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this desert to die of famine!" (Ex 16:2-3)

Having internalized imperial appetites and desires, the people cannot imagine life apart from their dependence upon the very system that enslaved them. Yet the God who liberates captives also offers sustenance: the gift of manna.

The text is clear, however, that this "bread raining from heaven" is not so much a miracle as it is a test to see whether Israel will follow instructions on how to realize Yahweh's alternative economy (Ex 16:4). The instructions are threefold (Ex 16:16-26):

1. everyone should gather just enough bread for their needs—this is an ethos that proscribes both "too much" and "too little";
2. the manna cannot be stored up—a prohibition against the economics of surplus accumulation;

3. the people must keep the Sabbath—a communal discipline that concerns the setting of limits that privileges being over doing.

The manna is thus a symbol reminding Israel that the purpose of economic organization is to guarantee enough for everyone, so that material sustenance circulates rather than concentrates.

It is significant that this archetypal expression of subsistence economics, gift cosmology and closely reflects the ethos of indigenous peoples the world over. Indeed, 99% of human history on this planet has been characterized by what anthropologists call “generalized reciprocity”—a symbiotic relationship with the ecological economy earth that up until a few generations ago also typified both Aboriginal and Native American hunter-gatherers. Paul Shepard argues that human beings are far more biologically adapted to these ancient lifeways than to modern economic behavior. “The prototype to which the genome is accustomed is Pleistocene society” he asserts, referring to the quarter of a million years of human “prehistory” prior to the rise of civilization around 12,000 years ago.

The old biblical tale of manna in the wilderness thus expresses an ancient memory of what it means to be human. The notion of Shabat, which first appears here in the Bible, sought to reconstruct Israel’s consciousness of dependence upon the land and the “divine economy of grace” which had been shattered by their experience in captivity. Imperial Egypt typified the ambitions of human civilization to re-engineer the creation by exploiting nature and controlling the forces of production. In contrast, Torah’s Sabbath regulations for the liberated community mean to interrupt this process by prescribing weekly “rest” for both the land and human labor (Ex 31:12-17). Every seventh year, cultivation is to cease in order that our artificial human economy, with its addictive-compulsive tendencies, does not destroy the economy of nature.

The biblical Sabbath vision culminates in a “Jubilee” every 49th year (Lev 25). The Jubilee was intended as Israel’s hedge against the inevitable tendency of human societies to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few, creating hierarchical classes with the poor at the bottom. In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or parts of the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family had to sell off its land in order to service a debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants could only sell their labor, becoming bond-slaves. The Jubilee aimed to dismantle such inequality through the:

- release of community members from debt (Lev 25:35-42; Dt 15:1-11);
- return of encumbered or forfeited land to its original owners (Lev 25:13,25-28);

- freeing of slaves (Lev 25:47-55; Dt 15:12-18).

The rationale for this unilateral restructuring of the community's wealth was that the earth belongs to God (Lev 25:23) and its fruits are a gift, so the people of the Covenant should justly distribute them instead of seeking to own and hoard them.

The manna story thus reveals the inevitable connection between economic inequality and the culture of slavery (Lev 25:42). This primal lesson was to be passed on: "Keep an omerful of manna for your descendants, that they may see what food I gave you to eat in the desert" (Ex 16:32). But it was forgotten, and in the settled life of Israel in Canaan the orthodoxy of the nations prevailed: "surplus-extraction" and "capital accumulation" inexorably took the place of equitable distribution. This in turn became the central complaint of Israel's prophets: "The spoil of the poor is in your houses; what do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" (Is 3:14f). The imperatives of commercial profit had eclipsed the principles of justice: "We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling sweepings of the wheat" (Amos 8:5f). And fidelity to international markets had replaced allegiance to God's economy of reciprocity and grace: "I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink" (Hosea 2:5).

Satan's challenge to Jesus to turn stones into bread, therefore, invokes the old primal wilderness anxiety about sustenance, and ridicules the divine economy as foolishness. Why not exploit the land for profit? Surplus promises security. Can Jesus renew the Exodus journey by making a different choice at this archetypal crossroad?

He does—countering with the first of three citations from Deuteronomy, the book of remembering—by recalling the lesson of the manna:

God has humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh (Dt 8:3 = Lk 4:4).

In his subsequent ministry Jesus will rehabilitate the vision of Sabbath economics in the two central petitions of the Disciples Prayer: "Give us enough bread for today, and release us from debt as we release others from debt" (Lk 11:3f).

Meanwhile, Jesus continues the tradition of prophetic challenge to economic stratification in Israel. His storytelling most often singles out the wealthy for critique (12:16-21; 16:1-31), and his two most important object lessons concern one rich

man who refuses the call to discipleship (18:18-27) and another who embraces it as the way of redistribution (19:1-10). Calling his disciples to "re-communitize" their assets (18:28-30), he warns them against the dominant money system, which he refers to simply as "Mammon" (16:10-13). This is the single greatest competitor to God for our loyalties, and against its power he pits the memory of the manna, which he reenacts in his feeding of the poor in the wilderness (Lk 9:10-17). There, while his disciples' cannot see past market constraints (9:12f), he demonstrates the economics of sharing in the tradition of an indigenous potlatch: "And all ate and were satisfied" (9:17). Indeed, Jesus' central metaphor for the Kingdom is the banquet table, which is to be set first and foremost for the marginalized and excluded (14:7-12).

Thus does Jesus stand firm against the seduction of idolatrous economics, thereby renewing the Dreaming. Can the church do likewise today in a world under death sentence by the gulf between rich and poor?

IV. "May Your sovereignty be realized!" Dispersal or Domination?

THE SECOND TEMPTATION both escalates the conflict and retraces the next stage in the apostasy of Israel—and of the church. Satan parades "all the kingdoms of the world" before Jesus, and offers to grant him jurisdiction over them—as a vassal-king, of course (Lk 4:5-7). The narrative here is very matter of fact in its analysis of state power. First, the notion that a pantheon of principalities could be viewed "in a moment" suggests that all forms of centralized political hegemony are essentially the same: seen one, seen 'em all. Second, there is no question but that they are all administered under the authority of the Devil himself. He can "deliver them to whom he wishes" indeed! Would that our churches could maintain such a clear perspective on the State as principality and power!

In fact, the Bible has a deep suspicion of empire that is woven into the very earliest traditions, most notably the Genesis myths of origins. Near Eastern antiquity was dominated (and Israel geopolitically surrounded) by powerful city-states, from Egypt to Babylon to Assyria. These highly centralized and hierarchical societies were rightly perceived by the Hebrew storytellers to be dangerous and predatory (thus the genealogy of nations stems from Nimrod, who is portrayed as "a mighty warrior-hunter" in Gen 10:8ff). The oldest polemic is the folk fable about the demise of the Tower of Babel—a thinly-veiled reference to the ziggurats of Mesopotamian civilization (Gen 11:1-9). God's antipathy towards this archetype of imperial pretense—represented in the tale by its centripetal economic power, its cultural homogeneity and its architectural hubris (11:1-4)—results in a "deconstructive scattering" (11:8f). The divine solution to overconcentrated social power is dispersal—presaging what modern sociologists are only beginning to rediscover,

namely that as in nature, diversity and decentralization is crucial to a healthy social ecology.

Here again we find a fundamental resonance with indigenous lifeways. As Kirkpatrick Sale writes in *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, in nature "nothing is more striking than the absence of any centralized control, any interspecies domination... there are none of the patterns of ruler-and-ruled that are taken as inevitable in human governance." This natural dispersal of power is mirrored in traditional forms of social organization known to "preliterate peoples all over the globe... In the tribal councils, the folkmotes, the ecclesia, the village assemblies, the town meetings, we find the human institution proven through time to have shown the scope and competence for the most basic kind of self-rule."

It is telling, then, that the initial polity of Exodus Israel was explicitly anti-monarchic. The vision for the Israelite confederacy consisted of twelve self-determining tribes with local adjudicators called "judges," loosely consociated under a Yahwistic covenant. As Hebrew bible scholar Norman Gottwald puts it, "sectors of the indigenous population joined in a combined sociopolitical and religious revolution against the imperial and hierarchic tribute-imposing structures of Egyptian-dominated Canaan... and federated in an intertribal community." Gottwald calls this "re-tribalization"—we might characterize it as a return to older ways of social organization in wake of the experience of intense suffering under imperial pathologies.

This sets up the first great plotline of the liberated Israel's history: the struggle to maintain the alternative confederacy under pressure from within and without to conform to the dominant political paradigm of monarchy. It is captured in the story of Gideon, the hero of guerilla military campaigns in Canaan: his grateful people want to make this "general" into a "king" (Judges 8:22f). He refuses, insisting that Yahweh alone is Israel's king, but others will not follow his lead. Thus in the warning tale about Abimelech's murderous grab for power Jotham spins his famous political parable about the absurdity of hierarchy when contrasted with the empirical heterarchy of nature (Judges 9:1-21). This is perhaps Scripture's clearest expression of indigenous wisdom about political dispersal.

Israel's fateful turning away from this vision is narrated poignantly in I Samuel 8. The community, now settled in Palestine, again gathers in complaint, this time demanding "a king to govern us" (8:5). The elder Samuel, representing the old wilderness federation (Judges 21:25), warns of the dire consequences of such a political project. It will mean the construction of a military machine and compulsory conscription (I Sam 8:11-13), State expropriation through eminent domain and oppressive taxation (8:14-18). But Israel was losing its vision of "holiness"—that is,

of its distinct identity. "No! We are determined to have a king over us so that we also may be like other nations" (8:19). Sure enough, the house of David would soon establish oppressive hegemony throughout Palestine, making Israel indistinguishable from the other regional powers. The concentration of wealth necessitates the centralization of power, and a people's true identity is determined by its economic relations and its system of governance.

But this drift, too, was continually contested by Israel's sages, as the great French theologian Jacques Ellul pointed out in *Anarchy and Christianity*. The royal chroniclers of the Bible, defying the historiographic conventions of antiquity, tended to reproach the "great" kings of Israel while eulogizing the "weak" rulers. In addition, "for every king there was a prophet...often a severe critic of royal acts." Ellul concludes that in the balance, the Hebrew Scriptures "ascribed no value to the state, to political authority, or to the organization of that authority."

Jesus returns to this archetypal crossroads, too, and rehabilitates the old insistence upon the exclusive (and thus anti-royalist) sovereignty of Yahweh. This time his defense is taken from the great Shema: "Hear O Israel" (Dt 6:4ff).

Take care that you do not forget Yahweh, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear and serve, and by this name alone you shall swear (Dt 6:12f = Lk 4:8).

Jesus reiterates this same point in the second petition of the Prayer: "May Your sovereignty be restored" (Lk 11:2). To pray this is to de-legitimize every other jurisdiction—particularly those that claim sovereignty. Otherwise would disciples not simply have been instructed to ask God's blessing upon the king-of-the-moment? This is the real significance of Jesus' famous proclamations about the "kingdom of God" (Lk 4:43; 10:9).

Does Jesus' calling and naming of twelve apostles—Moses-like on a mountain—also mean to rehabilitate the vision of "re-tribalization" and the wilderness confederacy (6:13ff; cf Num 1, Josh 13)? He certainly is re-enacting the old prophetic vigilance in his sardonic allusions to oppressive royalty (7:25; 19:11-27), as well as his sharp dismissals of the Davidic (Lk 20:41-44), Solomonic (11:31; 12:27) and Herodian dynasties (13:32; 23:6-12)—not to mention that of the emperor (13:1-3; 20:22-26). Most importantly, he subverts conventional expectations of political leadership in his call to "aspire downward" (9:46-48) and in own messianic practice—all the way to the cross (19:38; 23:1-3).

The Roman authorities understood perfectly the implications of Jesus' renewal of the Dreaming as it concerned Yahweh's sovereignty. The church since Constantine,

however, has not been so clear, and thus has succumbed repeatedly to the politics of domination. Jesus invites us to turn back to the wisdom of indigenous peoples to reanimate our imaginations about how we might work to disperse political power today, under the shadow of history's most dominating empire.

V. "May Your name remain holy!" Liberator or Patron?

WHAT AN EXTRAORDINARY PREFACE to the third and final test of character: "And then the Devil transported Jesus to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the Temple" (Lk 4:9). Satan with Jesus in tow. The Evil One with access to the Holiest place. The Fallen Angel quoting scripture. It ought to give us pause about every religious claim to represent God.

Satan knows that behind every political economy is a theology, a "sacred canopy" thrown over the regime to lend it cosmic legitimation. So he turns the tables on Jesus and begins thumping his version of the Bible—perhaps we can think of this as a sort of Presidential prayer breakfast. But the text is chosen, and interpreted, carefully: Psalm 91:11f. Indeed, this powerful statement of God's protection of those who "abide" can all too easily be misunderstood, like so much of scripture. When read through the hermeneutics of power and privilege the psalm becomes a tune of entitlement, a hymn to invulnerability, and finally an ode to empire. We have seen how "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" (Ps 91:2) became a marching tune for the Reich - - and thus truly what Phyllis Trible calls a "text of terror." This strand of political theology prevailed at times under the Israelite monarchy, as it has under every Christian empire since.

What Jesus confronts in this last temptation is the ultimate form of idolatry: identifying God's name with our historical projects. Our forces will prevail "though a thousand fall at your side" (91:7)—a favorite verse of military chaplains. Or, as both Bushes said during both Gulf Wars, "Our cause is right, our cause is just." Divinely appointed, historically favored, the U.S. strides the globe, treading upon evil empires and trampling two-bit dictators in disfavor (91:13), utterly convinced of its own innocence. God bless America.

This is the most consequential corruption of the original vision of Israel, which is why it is proscribed in the first three Commandments:

- i. nothing can be given priority over Yahweh (Ex 20:3);
- ii. no portrait can capture the Divine essence or presence (20:4);
- iii. no profession of God's name can place God on our side (20:7).

This "radical otherness" of the wilderness God, who refuses to be domesticated under any regime or civilization, was expressed archetypally in the name revealed famously to Moses in the burning bush: Yahweh—"I will be whoever I will be" (Ex 3:13-15).

In antiquity, however, the great institutionalized cultic centers were imperial culture's way of violating all three commandments. Imposing structures were built to the sky, and royalty dwelled in the penthouse suite communing with the gods, whose blessings underwrote the whole Temple-State. The cult thus functioned as the ideological mechanism in the Canaanite/Egyptian tributary system, complete with local shrines that secured political loyalty and facilitated collection of agricultural taxes in the hinterlands. Thus Israel's struggle against idolatry often focused on resistance to these "sacred poles" and "Asherahs," the most vivid narrative expression of which is found in the story of Gideon (Judges 6).

The narrator sets the scene with an Egypt-like description of Israel's oppression by the Midianites (6:1-10). This is followed by the Moses-like commissioning of the resister Gideon (6:4, 11) to rehabilitate Israel's struggle for liberation (6:12-14). In dramatic political theatre, Gideon under cover of night pulls down an official shrine of Baal and builds an "insurgent altar" to Yahweh right on top of it (6:11-27). Accused of sabotage by the local citizens, he is defended by his father, who takes up the classic Israelite taunt to idols: "If Baal is god let him defend himself." The episode ends with Gideon (whose name in Hebrew means "to cut down") assuming this defiant slogan as his revolutionary moniker: Jerubbabel means "Let Baal sue me!" (6:28-32). It is hardly surprising that Midianite retaliation comes immediately, which in turn sparks the popular insurrection under Gideon's leadership (6:33ff).

Sinai is the mysterious, clouded, wild mountaintop of communion with God in the Moses story (Ex 24:12-18), a stark contrast to the managerial and regimented "artificial mountain" of the imperial ziggurats. This is not to say, however, that Exodus Israel was anti-iconic; like other indigenous peoples their symbolic life was expressed through natural as well as intricately artful hand-made sacred objects. This is expressed at great (and to modern ears tedious) detail in the lengthy instructions concerning the crafting of the "ark of the covenant" and the "tent of the meeting" (Ex 25:1-31:11). But unlike the Temple-state, this was not only a mobile (and thus non-institutionalized) shrine, but indeed an "independent" and potentially "feral" one (I Sam 5-6).

It is worth noting that an historical survey of indigenous peoples around the world shows that where the economics of generalized reciprocity and the politics of bioregional tribalism remained intact, there was no evidence of a centralized cult (true universally among Aboriginal tribes and with only a few exceptions among

North American Indians). Conversely, wherever economic and political centralization triumphed, we find the architecture of domination, from the towers of Mesopotamia to the great Temples of India to the pyramids of the Inca, Maya and Aztec. And these cultic metropolises were often associated with human sacrifice—in all its forms.

Here again, Israel eventually abandoned its vocation. The ark is perceived by the insurgent king David as a threat, and is “brought in” so it can be housed, controlled, and ultimately disappeared (II Sam 6). David’s urge to construct a permanent cult is, like kingship itself, only reluctantly embraced by the “Old School,” and David’s hubris is chastised in the telling prophecy of Nathan (“Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel saying, ‘Why have you not build me a house of cedar?’” complains Yahweh in II Sam 7:4-17). Sure enough, in the Solomonic period a centralized Temple-State is established, replete with foreign dynastic alliances, standing armies, expanding borders and oppressive taxation (I Kings 3-11). But it turns out to be only a brief flirtation with regional hegemony, for within a few generations Israel’s grand experiment in “Egyptianization” ends in the disasters of civil war, defeat by bigger imperial forces, and ultimately exile.

The first Temple was originally envisioned as a storehouse for redistribution of the community’s surplus, but it inevitably became the mechanism by which power, wealth and privilege concentrated in the hands of Israel’s elite. Instead of a place where sacrifices were offered on behalf of the people, it became a place where the people were offered in sacrifice to the state. Again the prophets railed, warning that what Yahweh did to Babel’s tower he could do to his own “hijacked House”:

Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the Temple of the Lord..." Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbery? ...Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust...just what I did to Shiloh. (Jer 7:4,11,14).

Jesus, renewing the old Dreaming, will have occasion to re-enact these very words.

Waving Psalm 91:11f in Jesus’ face, the Devil urges him to “take the fall” for empire. And what a vantage point he offers, on the rooftop of the great Second Temple of Herod, above the gleaming capital city of Jerusalem, the center of Israel’s universe! It is of course a symbolic perch, the highest place in the “dwelling place of the Most High” (Ps 91:9). In other words, we are now at the heart of the historical project in question, and Satan assures Jesus that nothing can happen to him, for he will be “borne aloft” by his people’s ethnocentric theology of entitlement. We in the U.S. know this mantra all too well: our self-interest is acceptable to God, who will back us up and bail us out because we are God’s instruments of civilization.

One final time Jesus clings to the Deuteronomist: "You shall not test the Lord, as you did at Massah" (Lk 4:12 = Dt 6:16). He unmasks the Devil's attempt to reverse the divine mandate: It is not God who attends to our demands, but the inverse. The argument thus comes full circle, for at Massah ("place of testing") wilderness Israel for a second time despaired of sustenance (not bread, this time, but water) and pined for Egypt (Ex 17:1-7). The "I am" is no nation's patron, but the animator of the only redemptive historical project: human liberation (Ex 3:14). That is why the leading petition of the Disciple's Prayer is: "May your Name remain holy" (Lk 11:2).

Inevitably his struggle with idolatry culminates in Jesus' showdown with the system represented by the Jerusalem Temple (Lk 19:45-48). In his most famous midrashic challenge, Jesus asks whether it functions as a "House of prayer" (Is 56:7, an oracle that enfranchises outsiders) or as a "den of thieves" (the prophetic attack on Judah's smug sense of national entitlement based on the perception that God dwelled in the Temple, Jer 7:1-14). Then, in his last public action, he points to an object lesson of how the Temple system exploits the poor, and pronounces that the whole apparatus must be overthrown (21:1-6).

In the third temptation Jesus has once more arrived at a fateful intersection in the journey of his people, and chosen the "road less traveled." Today we live in the most idolatrous of ages, in which our desire for technological omnipotence knows no shame, from nuclear weaponry to genetic engineering. The radical Yahwist principle of non-identity remains our only hedge against every attempt to absolutize our institutions (the First Commandment), against all forms of commodity fetishism (the Second Commandment), and against whoever would draft God to legitimize domination (the Third Commandment). Only if we refuse to domesticate God's name will we be able to resist our pathological imperial tendency to objectify everything else: nature, the works of our hands, and indeed our own humanity.

VI. The Lenten Journey: Mimesis or Mimosis?

OUR STRANGE OLD GOSPEL STORY CONCLUDES with a sober epilogue: Having failed to seduce Jesus, the Devil departs, seeking a more "opportune time" (Lk 4:13). The word here, remarkably, is *kairos*—Luke's pointed reminder that there would be more such crossroads for God's people to face in the future. Indeed there were.

Apparently it did not take very long in the history of the church for the good news of liberation and healing to be abused by some to oppress and exploit. Already in the late first century one writer lamented the fact that some things in the tradition which were admittedly "hard to understand" were being "twisted by the ignorant and unstable to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (II Pet 3:6). He

complained bitterly about those who mishandled scripture by “smuggling in destructive opinions,” and anticipated that “because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned” (2:1-2).

He wasn't wrong. We know all too well multitude of ways in which the Bible was expropriated into the service of oppression throughout the long, painful and unfinished history of European world colonization and conquest. We struggle to make sense of 19th and 20th century Christian missionaries among indigenous peoples of around the world who indeed “slandered what they did not understand” (II Pet 2:12b). How often did “they promise freedom, but were themselves slaves of corruption” (2:19)? “In their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words” (2:3)—does this not summarize the legacy of Christian complicity with squatter's rights, Stolen Generations and the destruction of sacred lands?

The scriptural stories of liberation have indeed been profoundly compromised by ethnocentric mishandling and racist misrepresentation, not to mention practices of forced conversion and paternalistic resocialization. This has understandably caused many within the church (and many more without) to dismiss the Bible as hopelessly undifferentiated from the history of domination. This is not the whole truth, of course; these same stories have also animated movements for freedom, justice and human wholeness throughout the centuries—including in the Australian and American contexts. But if we are to reclaim the scriptural tradition, it must be in light of the more painful legacy, not despite it.

It is instructive that the Bible itself—as II Peter passionately attests—anticipates the human propensity to compromise, contaminate or suppress the liberating truth of Moses and Jesus. It is because of this inevitable dis-membering of the tradition that the Hebrew scriptures emphasize the discipline of re-membering. As the Deuteronomic refrain puts it: “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you” (Dt 8:2). This is what literary critic Eric Auerbach called mimesis: the Story itself invites its listeners to “re-enact” the liberation narrative in their own context, in every epoch. Conversely, the Deuteronomist warns that when people of faith do not practice mimesis they simply become like “the nations around them” (Dt 8:19f). We might call this mimosis, defined by Webster's as a condition whereby people simulate the pathologies that surround them.

Lent invites us to battle mimosis by practicing mimesis, to undertake afresh a vision-quest that will examine the choices our ancestors made for either Exodus or Egypt. It takes character and courage to seek to lay bare the roots of our national pathologies. In the U.S., for example, the fact that each year Lent falls during or just on the heels of Black History Month represents a great opportunity for the American church. There is no history more suppressed—nor more consequential—for our nation than

that of African Americans. Perhaps for Christians Lent really ought to commence with Black History month's public invitation to "re-vision" the terrible legacy of slavery and racism in order to embrace a true multicultural and just future.

In many other ways we who are the inheritors of the profoundly flawed legacy of "Progress" must face the truth about our past. The Devil tempted our ancestors and they too followed him, choosing to domesticate the wilderness and to conquer its peoples, instead of finding God among both. We have therefore become like the idols we worshipped: economically dominating yet captive to "affluenza," politically grandiose yet impotent to change what we dislike, children of empire who still piously invoke God's blessing and favor.

But there is another way. Repentance means to turn around, and that means not only facing the past but recovering what was left behind. With Jesus our Elder Brother, let us retrace our national footsteps back into the bush, confront our sins, and begin taking care of Unfinished Business with our indigenous First Peoples. We may also discover there older life ways which just might show us the way out of our historical conundrums.