

I haven't watched much of the Winter Olympics, in beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia, but I was fortunate to see U.S. skier Lindsey Vonn race downhill the other night to win a gold medal. In tears when the event was over and she had won gold, "I have wanted this my whole life." And there she was. She did it. It's done. Whatever else does and does not happen in her life, she has this accomplishment.

The race compelling, so fast downhill over what announcers told us was a very rough course. Lindsey Vonn was in pain from an injury that might have kept her out of the race. But for me the most compelling and memorable moment came at the very beginning. Come back to the moments at the top of the mountain, in the starting gate. Filled with anticipation. Fierce expression. Shaking, whether to build up energy or keep from exploding, don't know.

Embodied intensity of being on the verge of something she's prepared for with years of training and practice, her whole life. What a long moment of anticipation when the chance of fulfillment is finally here!

**Come now** to the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan, where Moses and the Israelites have finally come to the border of the land, at the end of 40 years of wilderness wandering, testing, and being formed as a people.

Been a long time coming. Seven or eight hundred years maybe, since Abram first heard the voice, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. Seven or 800 years since Abram became that wandering Aramean.

At the threshold, the border between wilderness and land, impulse of a landless people would seem to be to go for it, to rush across the river into home where none of them has ever been. But Moses, who won't go in with them, goes back over the commandments and all the law given at Mt. Sinai, a second time (Deuteronomy = "second law"). Thirty long chapters of instruction and reminders.

These people were born in the wilderness. First generation of Exodus from Egypt all died in the wilderness. These people have never been settled. Will have a new leader, Joshua. They have no idea what they are getting into. The long awaited new beginning will be different from anything they've ever known.

While Olympic skier's time of anticipation at the top was full of intensity, and the course downhill was unfamiliar, the race, the skiing were familiar. What she does. But what lies ahead for the Israelites will be profoundly disorienting. Moses calls this long pause to do what he can to re-orient the people before they move on.

They've been living on manna; it falls from heaven.  
Now there will be farming, harvests, fruit of the ground.

What to do? Whatever you do, don't just pick it and go home to eat. Go to God's new settled place, the place the LD "will choose as a dwelling for his name," after 40 years of leading in a pillar of fire, a pillar of smoke, camping out in the tent of meeting where God would speak with Moses.

Remember who you are and whose you are. Wandering Aramean was *our* father, we lived as aliens in Egypt. We were afflicted. The LD heard our voice and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. the ones. Say it. Say it every year so you may stay turned to God, connected with everything God has done for you (pl.).

And then, celebrate. Not just with your own clan, but also with Levites (to whom no land is allotted) and aliens who (from Israelites' perspective) have no land. Remember who you are. Your own wandering and landlessness. Not just the 40 years, the generations and the centuries of landlessness.

This ritual, this practice of remembering and reorienting to form and shape a people, to absorb into the fiber of their being so they may live as a people of God.

**Come again** to wilderness, west of the Jordan, centuries, maybe a millennium later. Jesus has come *into* wilderness, deliberately, intentionally, led by the Spirit.

Baptized. Anointed, filled with the Spirit; named, declared God's Beloved Son. With all that in his favor, might think Jesus could and would be eager to get right down to business: teach, preach, heal, proclaim, reveal kingdom of God.

But no. At threshold of his ministry, he comes to this place of disorientation. Led by the Spirit to be tested by the devil. He is as vulnerable as he has ever been in his life. Empty now of all sustenance, all support and structure except the same Spirit, which fills him.

The devil offers him a way to fill his all too human hunger. Something other than the immeasurable good the Father intends. An identity and servanthood less, but deceptively, disorientingly like his true identity. Something that is a mere shadow of his Father's kingdom and his Father's plan.

To use his power to meet his own need rather than wait on God  
To choose control and power over human beings, to be served rather than to serve  
To take a leap of faith from the pinnacle of the temple, to see whether God will, indeed, protect him, God's Beloved Son.

Luke T. Johnson notes that this is the really hard one, because “what is the radical obedience of the servant except something very close to just such a blind leap?”<sup>1</sup> But this is not the time. It’s not the Father asking this of him. When it is the time, when the Father does ask, Jesus will make the leap, entrusting himself entirely to God, saying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (LK. 23:46)

**Come to Rome**, or, no, actually not to Rome. Come to wherever Paul was when he wrote his letter to the church at Rome.

Where are we, and what are we doing here? Assume that the lectionary creators include this snippet from Paul’s letter on this day because Paul writes about “the word”; it is very near you. Paul, Jesus, even the devil are all quoting scripture. Looks like it might fit; maybe it does through that lens. Not where I’ve gone.

What I see is that this snippet is so out of context, floating free as if it stands on its own. Which it doesn’t.

One step in long (ch. 9-11) process through which Paul struggles to make sense of a dilemma, struggles to understand the failure of his mission to Israel. Struggles to understand what is his part in God’s plan.

Baffled, heart broken by Israel’s rejection of Jesus, the Messiah, righteousness of God. Israel has rejected him twice: rejected Jesus himself, and rejected Paul’s preaching. All as Gentiles have come flooding into the church.

And it is so simple for Paul. So obvious. “‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” How could anyone not get it, especially God’s own people to whom Messiah came?

Makes no sense to Paul. How could this be God’s plan? Could God have abandoned God’s people, Israel, and the covenant. Not possible. God is trustworthy, even when human beings are not.

I don’t know how long Paul sat thrashed his way through this wilderness, anguished and disoriented by this dilemma. He could have said, *if this is how it’s going to be, if the Jews, my own people, are not going to believe Jesus is Messiah, I quit. Not fair. Not what I expected.*

But he doesn’t. He hung on. He goes into the disorientation with everything he’s got. Trusts God and Christ completely. He is beginning to come to a new realization

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<sup>1</sup>Luke T. Johnson, The Gospel of Luke (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1991), 76.

here. Only beginning: “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek (Gentile); the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.”

He will continue to work it through and come to a new understanding; through his openness to God’s re-orienting, and his willingness to let go his own reasonable expectations. Paul, as a Jew, turns out to just the right apostle to the Gentiles. He tells us to remember who we are, grafted into the tree whose roots you cannot live without, whose roots are Judaism, God’s covenant with the Jews.

Without their rejecting Christ, we would have had no chance to believe. And in the end, how God will bring his own people to himself is a mystery, only God’s to know.

**Come now** to this time, this place, where we stand just over the threshold, just inside the wilderness of Lent. Four days in.

The Scriptures have taken us on quite a journey through time and space. Through disorientation and re-orientation. To bring us back to ourselves, in this season of time out of time, time of anticipation of the events of Holy Week and Easter.

How will we let ourselves be shaped by the days ahead? Open ourselves to the transforming presence and action of God. Let go our grip on some of our favorite and familiar things, attachments to favorite foods, distractions and entertainments, busyness.

Stay with the anxiety, emptiness, even disorientation that will arise without those familiar patterns and comforts. And wait and watch. Aware of the attachment, the habit of filling the emptiness for ourselves. God may not come rushing in; but there is recognition, something new. Openness to make a new beginning, to be led by the Spirit into the new direction God may already have prepared for us. To be led into new depths of intimacy with God and our neighbor. The beginning, perhaps, of God’s re-orienting us, realigning us more closely with God’s desire and purpose for us and for all God’s people, for all creation.