

So here are the rest of the Things You should never say to a police officer:

1. You're not gonna check the trunk, are you?
2. Gee, Officer! That's terrific. The last officer only gave me a warning too!
3. I was trying to keep up with traffic. Yes, I know there are no other cars around. That's how far ahead of me they are.
4. When the officer says, "Gee, Son....Your eyes look red, have you been drinking?" do not respond with, "Gee, officer your eyes look glazed, have you been eating doughnuts?"

OK, first some background. The desert occupies a powerful place at the heart of Jewish and Christian traditions. Think about the Book of Exodus – the Bible's great epic story of the liberation of a people and a promised land – with 40 years of wandering -- in the desert. We realize that simultaneously, the desert is a place of resistance, refuge, and revelation. In the early centuries of Christianity, the desert was home for those seeking countercultural withdrawal. Many men and women, who came to be known as desert fathers and mothers, experienced the wilderness as a refuge from the Roman empire, which was increasingly inhospitable to them. The empire's association with the powerful and wealthy was inconsistent with how many people believed they ought to live out their Christian calling.

The desert offered a particular kind of formation. It could be harsh, offering unwelcome discipline – much like a parent might. It required the desert dwellers to grow up, fend for themselves, to play well with others, and to share – all guidance we should have received from our parents.

But a big part of the desert's magic was that within what appeared to be a place of great scarcity, there emerged surprising abundance. What could be harsh might offer a warm welcome. The landscape's paradox offered space for theological paradox: The incarnation: God in flesh. A virgin who gives birth. One God; three persons. The Apostle Paul's simultaneous willing and not-willing to do good. Even the subtle interplay of the body's, mind's, and spirit's needs. The desert helped those who sought it -- to lean more deeply into undermining their assumptions and cravings for what *is* – and leading them to *what should be*. (adapted from Rohr, posting of 16 February 2026)

We know from the gospels that at some point Jesus left His craft, left His family, and left Nazareth. He wasn't looking for a new occupation. He didn't seek out a recognized teacher to study torah, or to learn more about the Jewish traditions. He didn't go to the shores of the Dead Sea, seeking admission to the Qumran community. Neither did He go to Jerusalem, to see the temple. He just walked away from the inhabited world and into the desert.

The wilderness recalled the birthplace of His Jewish ancestors: the place they must return to at times of crisis, in order to begin again the history cut short by their unfaithfulness to God. Orders from Rome and the bustle of the temple did not reach the desert; no one heard the discourse of the teachers of the law. What they could hear was God's voice in the silence and loneliness. According to the prophet Isaiah, the desert was the best place to "make straight a highway for our God," and let God enter the heart. Jesus followed his cousin John into the desert. He wanted to listen to the God who "speaks tenderly" to His people in the wilderness. (adapted from Jose A. Pagola, JESUS, AN HISTORICAL APPROXIMATION, p. 77) And apparently, in the desert, Jesus heard His Father call to Him to go to the people and announce the Good News of the Kingdom of God. In that sense, He had discovered His vocation, His purpose, and the meaning of His life.

OK, so what about us? A healthy spirituality has to have a place for deserts, wilderness, and other such places where we are unprotected and in danger from untamed nature, wild beasts, and threatening spirits. This concept has deep roots inside both ancient religions and the human psyche itself, and it is why the church annually invites us into the desert every Lent. And this is multi-layered.

In ancient Babylon, for example, wild, uncultivated terrain was seen as something that was unfinished by God and which still participated in the formless chaos pre-creation. It was seen both as unfinished and as a place where dangerous forces lurked, beasts and devils. So when people were in possession of wild, uncultivated land, it was understood that certain religious rites had to be performed which, in essence, claimed the land for God, for civilization, and for safety. For ancient Babylon, a cultivated garden was a safe and sacred place -- whereas an uncultivated desert was dangerous and in some dark way in opposition to God.

Similar ideas were present too in other cultures which saw wilderness as a place inhabited by satyrs, centaurs, trolls, and evil spirits. Myths and folklore abound with these images. Medieval Europe, as seen in its fairytales, added the idea of 'deep and dark forests' to this concept. We see echoes of this in the Forbidden Forest of the Hogwarts Castle in the Harry Potter series. These were all seen as uncultivated, dangerous places, places where bad spirits or evil persons might capture you or as places within which we might hopelessly lose our way. Deep, dark forests were not places we were to venture into without proper guidance.

But it was also understood that these wild places were not meant to lie forever untouched by us and God. The idea was present inside of Christian spirituality that we, men and women of faith, were meant to help God finish creation by taming these wilds, exorcizing the bad spirits there, and turning the wilderness into a garden. And so Christianity developed the idea that men and women armed in a special way with divine light and protection, monks and nuns, could and should go into these uncultivated places and turn the unsafe wilderness into a safe garden. Among other reasons, this was why medieval monks and nuns often chose uncultivated places to start up their monasteries and convents.

The fear of wild, uncultivated regions was also partly behind the church's fear of inquiry into and exploration of outer space. Galileo knew this first-hand. The church had been warning: Stay away from certain dark places.

Third, in subtle ways both this concept and its accompanying fears are still with us. What frightens us today is not untamed geography (which we now tend to see as inviting peace and quiet). Rather, for many of us, the untamed, the wilderness, is now visualized more as a gang-infested area within a city, crack houses, singles' bars, Strip-clubs, red-light districts, dark places on the internet that often lead to addiction. These are understood as lying outside our cultivated lives, split off from the safety of home and religion, godless places, dangerous, a wilderness.

But these exterior realities invite us to look at the untamed and uncultivated deserts within our own hearts, the unexplored and dark areas inside of us. Like the ancients, we are frightened of what might lie in hiding there, where a chaotic vortex might swallow us up should we ever venture there. We too fear unexplored places; except our fear is not for our physical safety, but for our sanity and our sanctity.

And this fear is not without its wisdom. It is wise to not be naïve. For centuries parents told their children frightening fairytales about evil things lurking in dark forests, looking to devour little children or bake them in ovens. These stories were not told to children to give them nightmares but rather warn them not to be naïve about whom or what they met. Not everyone can be trusted, not everything on a computer is good. So it is wise at any age to recognize where we are vulnerable, and unarmed, to stay together, to stay away from dark places, and to be safe.

Nonetheless our Christian faith invites to go into those areas, face the wild beasts that dwell there, and turn those dangerous regions into cultivated land, into safe gardens. After all that is what Jesus did: He went into every dark place, from the singles' bars of His time into death and hell itself, and took God's light and grace there. But He was not naïve. He heeded the advice of the old fairytales and didn't venture there alone. He entered those underworlds with His hand safely inside His Father's, not walking alone.

Faith is meant to rid us of fear, including fear of the wild beasts and demons that lurk inside the deserts of our own minds, hearts, and energies. We are meant to turn those wild, dark areas into safe gardens. But we should heed both our own instincts and the instinct behind the old fairytales: Never venture into the dark woods naively and alone! Make sure you are armed with a sturdy faith and walking hand-in-hand with Our Heavenly Father. Only then can we emerge from the desert like Jesus, knowing our deep down identity – as beloved sons and daughters of an ever-loving God – and

from that discover our vocation – something that always has to do with compassion, love and service to others. So may it be for you and for me. Amen. (last section adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 21 February 2010)

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