

# A Desert Journey

By Robert Dunn

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,*

*'One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that  
comes from the mouth  
of God.'*"

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,*

*'He will command his angels  
concerning you,'  
and 'On their hands they  
will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash  
your foot against a stone.'*"

*Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,*

*'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'*"

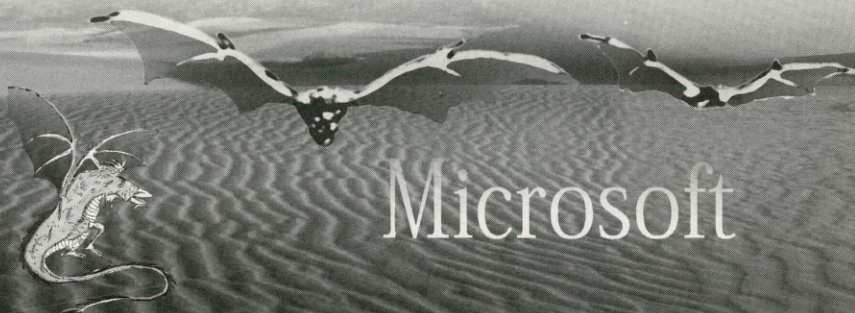
*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matt. 4:1-11 NRSV)*

## Introduction

I have found our gospel challenging, so I shall not approach it in the usual way. Homilies and sermons usually come at a text through the discursive and analytical process of historical and moral analysis. There is nothing wrong with this approach. This morning, however, I shall attempt to put myself—not precisely but suggestively—into the text, on behalf of all of you. I shall do so in an imaginative, almost poetic way. My purpose is not to analyze but to open ourselves to the possibility that our own life histories may spiritually be merged with the history of Jesus of Nazareth. We are incorporated into the life of Jesus not so much by reason as by love, and the language of love is poetry.

The Spirit also led me into the wilderness.  
The Spirit led me into the wilderness,  
And there, as a child, the devils tempted me.  
In my childish fantasy I thought I spied a basilisk,

# LEXUS



# Microsoft

A cockatrice,  
And "Great bats on leathern wings."<sup>1</sup>  
I was afraid and did not know myself.

I wanted food and drink and nurture.  
I hungered to grow and to know.  
I wanted to rule our house.

My mother assured me that she loved me.  
"Turn my love into bread," she urged.  
My father was pleased with my choice of work.  
"Make my acceptance your drink."

Then I thought, my parents do not know the real me.  
Would they reclaim their love and approval if they  
read my heart?  
And then my mother died,  
My father passed away,  
And I remained alone and hungry after all.

The Spirit also led me into the wilderness.  
The Spirit led me into the wilderness,  
And there, as a child, the devils tempted me.  
In my childish fantasy I thought I spied a basilisk.  
A cockatrice,  
And "Great bats on leathern wings."

And then my mother died,  
My father passed away,  
And I remained alone and hungry after all.

Then I saw a pelican on Lake Ignorance.<sup>2</sup>  
"Child," she spoke, "Feed on me."  
"I am the bread of life.  
I bring strength for your journey,  
Food for your soul."

"Child," the Pelican spoke, "feed on me."  
In love I responded, "My Lord, my God."

So I ate and knew at once my Mother,  
My Father, my relation to the world.  
I was happy now even when I saw the basilisk,

the cockatrice,  
And "Great bats on leathern wings."

"Child," the Pelican spoke, "feed on me."  
In love I responded, "My Lord, my God."

||

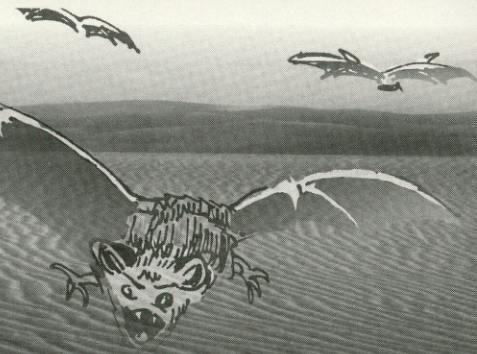
For many days I continued to walk the desert,  
I grew older.  
I became an adolescent and youth.  
But the Spirit was not through with me.  
The devils returned.  
"How can you be certain?" they inquired.  
"How do you know that God spoke to you?"  
All we saw were your father and mother.  
So tell us, how can you be certain?"

A loathsome snake out of the pit taunted me.  
A snake named Logic asked me,  
"How can you be certain?"  
A loathsome snake out of the pit taunted me,  
A snake named Logic asked me,  
"Did God speak to you?  
Or was it not your father, your mother  
Who told you who you are?  
And now they are dead;  
You are alone.  
Did God give you his body and blood,  
Or were they not mere signs, metaphors?  
And now God himself is dead."

A loathsome snake out of the pit taunted me,  
A snake named Logic advised me,  
"If you want real proof, ask for a sign.  
If you want real proof, speak in an unknown  
tongue.  
If you want real proof, ask God to heal your  
body.  
Then you will learn: God can do nothing tangible."  
So I turned away in despair.

Mercedes

Apple



I slouched about the desert many days,  
And in the nights the devils taunted me:  
"God can do nothing tangible."  
I slouched about the desert many days,  
And in the nights the devils taunted me:  
"God can do nothing tangible."



But still the Spirit was not done with me.  
The demons returned.  
I had no peace.  
Once again I was not happy when I saw the basilisk,  
I was not pleased when I spied the cockatrice,  
I did not wish to find "Great bats on leathern wings."  
The loathsome snake out of the pit,  
The dragon named Logic, terrified me.

I cried out in my fear, and the unknown God heard.  
I cried out in my fear, and the unknown God heard.

Gradually the fears all passed away.  
The basilisk vanished.  
The cockatrice disappeared.  
"Great bats on leathern wings"  
Melted into air,  
Into thin air.

For were not all these childish fears?

Gradually the fears all passed away.  
The loathsome snake out of the pit,  
The dragon named Logic, fled.  
For was not this a fear of adolescence and youth?  
And was I not at last mature?

The lure of travel replaced the basilisk.  
A 401K promising ease in retirement  
Stood in for the cockatrice  
And a host of ads,  
Like "Great bats on leathern wings,"  
Offered endless satisfactions.

A host of ads sung the new song,  
"Our lost Eden has been restored  
By Proctor & Gamble,  
By Microsoft,  
By Nordstrom,  
By 10,000 companies.

Praise be our American way of life!  
Do not focus on the loathsome serpent.  
Fall down and worship Lexus,  
Offer incense to MacDonalds,  
Deliverance is here!"

To earn this happiness,  
For earn it you must,  
They all advised that  
I must worship them.  
And, in my way, I did worship.  
Emotion now replaced the serpent of logic  
And I was swept up on a wave of consumerism.

To earn this happiness,  
For earn it you must,  
They all advised that  
I must worship them.  
And, in my way, I did worship.  
Emotion now replaced the serpent of logic  
And I was swept up on a wave of consumerism.

But happiness never came.  
All promises were vain,  
Mere mirages,  
Will-'o-the-wisps.  
They did not reassure.  
They told me in a thousand ways,  
"You are not OK.  
Buy more.  
Get more."

In despair, I turned and cried,  
Things are not enough,



Thoughts are not enough,  
 Emotions are not enough.  
 I want to see more than a new piece of earth.  
 I want to live more than a good retirement.

Yet how can I be delivered from bondage to such  
 desires?  
 I have learned that parents are not enough,  
 That logic does not suffice,  
 That no thing,  
 No experience,  
 No emotion will endure.

I have learned this beautiful world is not enough.  
 I sense a restless longing in my soul.  
 From whence it comes I do not know.  
 Where it leads, who can say?

I have learned this beautiful world is not enough.  
 I sense a restless longing in my soul.  
 From whence it comes I do not know.  
 Where it leads, who can say?

And then the devils left and angels came.  
 One of them spoke,  
 "Seek after God," she said.  
 "Your heart will remain restless  
 until it rests in God.  
 Yet 'silence is not God,  
 Nor speaking is not God;  
 Fasting is not God,  
 Nor eating is not God;  
 Loneliness is not God,  
 Nor company is not God;  
 Nor yet any of all the other two such contraries.  
 God is hid between them.  
 He may not be found by any work of the soul,  
 But only by love of your heart.  
 He may not be known by reason,  
 He may not be gotten by thought,  
 Nor concluded by understanding;  
 But he may be loved and chosen  
 with the true lovely will of the heart. . . .  
 Such a blind shot with the sharp dart of longing  
 Love may never fail of the prick, the which is God."<sup>3</sup>

I have learned this beautiful world is not enough.  
 I sense a restless longing in my soul.  
 From whence it comes I do not know.  
 Where it leads, who can say?

And angels came and turned desert rocks into bread.

They came and struck a rock, and out flowed water.  
 And then the angels came and worshiped God.

Then God said, "I am the bread of life.  
 Eat of me."  
 Then the Son said, "I am the living fountain.  
 Drink of me."  
 And, in the Spirit, I eat and drink and live.

And then angels came and turned desert rocks into  
 bread.  
 They came and struck a rock, and out flowed water.  
 And then the angels came and worshiped God.

Then God said, "I am the bread of life.  
 Eat of me."  
 Then the Son said, "I am the living fountain.  
 Drink of me."  
 And, in the Spirit, I eat and drink and live.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the  
 Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to  
 help us who are assailed by many temptations;  
 and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us,  
 let us each one find you mighty to save; through  
 Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and  
 reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,  
 now and for ever. Amen.\*

## Notes and References

1. In medieval legend, the basilisk and cockatrice were fabulous creatures, whose breath and even glance were said to kill. Here they are simply the fearful constructs of childish imagination. The images of basilisk, cockatrice, and bats were suggested by Robert Graves's poem "In the Wilderness," from *Chapters Into Verse*, eds. Robert Atwan and Laurence Wieder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2:53-54.

2. In the medieval bestiary, the pelican, for love, fed her young of her own blood. So she became a symbol of the redemptive work of Christ and also of Holy Communion.

3. "An Epistle of Discretion," in *The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises* (1521), ed. Edmund G. Gardner (New York: Noble Offset, 1966), 257-59. From the online version in Christian Classics Ethereal Library <<http://www.ccel.org/g/gardner/cell/cell19.htm>>, accessed April 1, 2002.

4. Collect for the First Sunday of Lent, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 218.

---

Robert Dunn is a professor of English at La Sierra University, Riverside, California. He originally presented this article as a homily at the 8:30 a.m. Sabbath service at the La Sierra University Church on February 16, 2002.