I invite you to imagine going on a camping trip. Perhaps many of us have been camping. This trip is a little different than most camping trips because we are taking this trip by ourselves. It is to be a long solo camping trip. It also isn’t going to be in our RV; instead, we will use tents and sleep outside on the ground. We will also leave our four-wheel drive vehicle at the wilderness entrance and walk on from there.

Our first decision is what do we take on the camping trip? We’ll be walking with our gear on our backs, so we want to take only the things required to sustain life. We take a sleeping bag and a small tent. We probably don’t want to take a camp stove because of the weight and bulk. So, we take food that can be cooked around the campfire, a pot, and a mess kit. Do we also take a coffee pot? Is that a necessity for life that warrants carrying it? Maybe. Maybe not.

If we’re not sure we can start a fire naturally, we take a Firestarter. Water is necessary for life, so we take a thermos or canteen. We also pack an extra set of underwear and socks. Perhaps an extra shirt. Bug spray and sunscreen. A toothbrush and toothpaste. A flashlight. We look at that camp chair. It might be comfortable, but we can’t haul that on our back, so we leave that at home.

When we are on our trip, how do we handle the silence? Do we hum to ourselves? Does silence make us anxious? Does it make us crazy? Or is it peaceful? Perhaps we feel the Holy Spirit’s presence and find time to talk to God. Maybe we listen to the sounds of nature. Maybe we find time to examine our conscience and thoughts. That may be OK with us, or it might be scary to have these feelings we’ve outrun suddenly all catch up with us.

Suppose we encounter some wild animals – either real animals, like bears -- or beasts within ourselves that struggle for our souls. Do we stay in this wilderness, trusting that God will work in this situation, or do we pack up our things and go back home where we don’t have to struggle with the beasts? In our struggles, how do we know the voice of God from the voice of the tempter?

The wilderness can be a scary place. It forces us to examine ourselves and to be open to what God has to say to us. Yet, if we are to have a holy Lent, we need to go to that wilderness.

The wilderness does not necessarily need to be a physical place, although Lenten retreats are helpful. The wilderness is a spiritual place with spaces for self-examination and repentance, with places where we trust God to lead us.

We go alone, and we take with us only what is necessary. If we bring too much baggage, we won’t be able to complete the journey. So a large part of the journey is the preparation. It is setting aside those things that will hinder the experience. That means pride, greed, grudges, the need to be in control.

The rest of the wilderness journey is reflection. It is a time when we listen to all that is at war within our minds and souls and trust that God will lead us. We discern God’s voice from that of the tempter because God urges us to follow the commandments in the Scripture. God’s voice encourages us to make the love of God and love of neighbor the priorities in our lives. The tempter encourages us to do things that make us more significant than others or serve us at the expense of others. God urges us to step out in faith to help others in new and creative ways. The tempter urges us to take stupid risks that have no purpose other than to make us look or feel good, such as driving our car way too fast or jumping off the ledge of a two-story building.

God urges us to buy and to only use what we need or what brings us joy, rather than to fall prey to the god of materialism or overconsumption. The voice of the tempter says, “You know you want this shiny new thing” over and over until you give in and buy it rather than giving the money to the church or to someone in need. God urges us to do our best day in and day out. The tempter urges us to take shortcuts.

In our Lenten wilderness, we struggle with these voices. We consider our lives and how we can do a better job of responding to the voice of God rather than the voice of the tempter. We leave behind those things that prevent us from having a holy and complete wilderness experience. Then we emerge from the wilderness cleansed, transformed, and ready for God’s service.