

The Call of Wilderness

Matt.4:1-11

Hebrews 4:14-16

For the 6 Sundays of lent we will be looking at some passages/people that have a wilderness theme to them. Some are apparent and obvious wilderness experiences, like this morning's passage where the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days. Or Moses in the desert. Others are more symbolic wilderness experiences. Like the apostle John imprisoned on the isle of Patmos.

Goal is to reflect on what these wilderness experiences teach us as we prepare to emerge from our wilderness of covid quarantine, when the time comes. And we will emerge from it! Things won't be the same, though, and they are not supposed to be. That's the point of wilderness experiences; they are transformational experiences.

This morning's passage is the telling of Jesus being led into the wilderness for 40 days. This passage is typically given to read, in the church year, for the first Sunday of Lent, to remind us of our journey with Christ into a season of reflection and strengthening. And perhaps testing.

It's important to note that this is what takes place immediately following Jesus' baptism. Jesus was baptized, not because he needed to be, but so he could

identify with us in our humanity. Here is God in the flesh, relating to us and identifying with us in all of our human experience. And at Jesus' baptism he heard these words: "You are my beloved, with you I am well-pleased." This is simply his identity, beloved child of God, and it pleases his Father, and our Father, to say that to *all* of his children. We are supposed to claim those words, and that affirmation, as our own—beloved daughter, beloved son. So, Jesus receives his identity and affirmation. Here is what happens next.

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

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

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ *Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

¹¹ *Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

This is the word of the Lord.

On this first Sunday of Lent we remember, again, Jesus' 40-day sojourn in the wilderness. Jesus goes from the delight of hearing the God the Father's words of identity and affirmation straight to the wilderness place, and the testing that came at the end of that time. This morning I want to focus mainly on the wilderness portion of this, the first 39 days, if you will. I'll briefly touch on the testing that comes on the 40th day.

Lent is a season of reflection and renewal and strengthening, and this passage is an excellent way to begin the season because that's exactly what happens here with Jesus: he is led into wilderness to be *strengthened*. I like to reframe this as wilderness *strengthening*, not just "temptation in the wilderness" as it's typically referred to. Because, the gospel writers tell us that the temptation comes at the *end* of the 40 days. So, that means Jesus has had 39 days of solitude and silence. That's a lot of time of quiet! And a lot of time to think. And to try *not* to think! That may be truer to the purpose of wilderness experiences like this,

where it is much less important to think, and more important to quiet our minds so we can pray, and listen, and receive strength.

The temptations—or as I prefer to look at it, the brief time of *testing*—also came to strengthen him, and strengthen his resolve, because he was vulnerable after a month or so of solitude and fasting. But let's reflect on the concept of wilderness, and the wilderness experiences that we all go through during our lives, at different times. Including this covid quarantine wilderness.

For centuries, even millennia, reaching back before Jesus to remember God's people of ancient times, wilderness has been seen as a place of intentionality, and of purpose. Whether we think of it literally, or figuratively. It's the intentionality and the purposefulness that I want us to pay attention to here, and not necessarily the location.

Because it's clear from the gospels that Jesus was ***led*** into the wilderness ***by the Spirit***. Jesus didn't accidentally stumble into it, the devil didn't lead him into it, nor were there random circumstances that forced a wilderness journey. Jesus didn't take a wrong turn and get lost. The gospel writers make it clear: this is a divine appointment for the next 40 days.

In all of the Bible and throughout Christian history, God's saints (that includes you and me) have been led to journey into wilderness times and places for divine appointments; to be asked to let go of, or be stripped away of, dependencies and attachments, and have their lives reoriented toward God's purposes for them. Wilderness plays an important—perhaps even essential—role in the lives of God's children.

In Scripture, wilderness functions as a place of strengthening and preparation. The forty day or forty-year periods of sojourn in the wilderness are periods of strengthening, and for preparation for living into a new thing that God is about to do.

This is a common Biblical narrative:

- ⇒ As Noah and an assortment of family and wildlife keep afloat for 40 days of the flood with no land in sight (a watery wilderness, but a wilderness nonetheless);
- ⇒ As God's people journey, ever so slowly, from Egypt to the Promised Land over 40 years. 'Wander' is a better word (JRR Tolkien: "Not all who wander are lost"—there is purpose in it)

⇒ As the prophet Elijah moves from depression and despair to confidence and renewed purpose over 40 days when he goes into the wilderness to flee, because wicked Jezebel was intent on taking his life;

⇒ As Jesus moves from his baptism into his public ministry, through the 40 days in the wilderness. And even at the end of his human journey Jesus experiences the wilderness of betrayal and abandonment and facing imminent death; a wilderness of facing his fears and anguish.

These, and so many others, all pass through wilderness. The in-between space is a time to encounter God—and in the wilderness we encounter *ourselves* as people in relationship with God—to be prepared and strengthened for what God wants to do next in our lives. Wilderness is almost always a place of preparation for what’s next for us. Whatever “next” may be. We see that in all of the Biblical characters, and people of God—they emerge from the wilderness with a new or renewed sense of call and purpose, or some kind of life change. We’ll see that as we go along in this series.

The wilderness may look different for each of us. For some it might be experienced as loss. For others it may come at a transition point in life when the question is, “Who am I now?” For some it may be an illness that we live with for a

time, and for others it may simply be when we get to that point of realizing “My life just isn’t working right now; I’m a mess”—and we get to the end of ourselves and have nowhere else to turn; which isn’t a bad place to be, because we become truly open to God’s gracious activity.

Because in wilderness experiences we become dependent upon God. We have nowhere else to turn. In any of these, whatever the cause, the wilderness becomes a place of recalibration, refocusing, and reorienting our lives toward God, and gaining a renewed sense of ourselves.

We may not have thought of it this way, but when we can redefine some of the challenging or difficult times in our life’s journey as wilderness, or desert, they take on a new meaning. They become redemptive. Maybe not easier, but purposeful. Because they invite us to surrender our unhealthy attachments and dependencies, and to pay attention to what *God* is doing, and wait in prayer for what God is *about* to do in our life.

And I wonder if covid quarantine has felt like that for any of you. Aside from it just being about loss, or annoyance—how has God been working, stirring, in your life these last 11 months? Have you had to detach from anything, or has

something been stripped away from you? I wonder what has changed for you these past 11 months—what internal shifts have taken place.

We may not know the answers to these questions until we get back out there, when we return to some semblance of normalcy and we actually begin to experience the changes. But these are the conversations we need to have when we regather. Things will have changed *out there*. Think about how the world changed after Sept.11. We will have that level of change society and culture.

But what will have changed in here (heart and mind)? Perhaps that is yet to be apparent. But we've had 11 months of covid time, so there may be some shifts that have already become apparent to you.

Now, it needs to be said that not all difficult experiences are wilderness times. Sometimes they are just simply difficult, and we rely on God to provide what we need in the midst of them. I would never say to any victims of a shooting, for example, "This is a wilderness time." No, that is a tragedy, senseless and brutal, and the families in that situation need immediate comfort and help without pious platitudes or attempts to make sense of it.

But there are times, even through some of life's difficulties, where we can draw parallels between what we are experiencing and what God's saints in Scripture and throughout history have experienced through similar journeys.

So, sometimes the Spirit will *lead us*, in love, like Jesus, into the wilderness.

Here's an important piece of this: in the Bible it isn't until the **end** of the 40-day (or 40 year) journeys that God shows up in a significant way to speak or act or permit something to happen, which signals the close of the wilderness time. Or to put it another way, there is a lot of quiet, a lot of silence, a lot of not knowing, in between God sending people into wilderness, and God bringing them out.

⇒ It's at the *end* of 40 days that God causes the waters recede he gives the sign of the rainbow, his covenant promise to never to flood the earth again. But for 39 days, there was a lot of storm and stink and... quiet, figuratively speaking.

⇒ At the *end* of 40 years God shows Moses the promised land and God leads them into it. God didn't give instructions about where and when and what, at the beginning of their journey. And although God gave the people the Law and led them through the desert, there was a lot of quiet space, and of

course a lot of wandering and wondering—and some complaining!—during those 40 years of not knowing where they were going to end up;

⇒ It's at the *end* of 40 days of solitude that God breaks silence with Elijah, who is hiding in a cave, depressed.

⇒ And Jesus' testing comes *after* 39 days of wilderness and solitude, as God permits this testing to happen.

What this means is, wilderness is as much about the 39 as it is the 40 and what happens after that. The end is a very important *conclusion* or *fulfillment* of the wilderness time—the next thing that God does. But what happens during the 39 is as important as what finally happens after 40.

And it needs to not be cut short. And it needs to not be passive, a twiddling of the thumbs until something happens or God finally speaks.

What if these people had given up? What if Noah had given up, or Moses, or Jesus? “Well, this is tedious, boring, and difficult.” Like them, we need to hang in there and listen and pay attention and persevere through the wilderness, and through the quiet, so the full blessing of that experience can come to fruition and be received and enjoyed at the right time.

What this also means is that, because God didn't reveal to anyone at the beginning of their wilderness journey what would happen after 40 days (or 40 years), it means that often times when we are in the wilderness, *we have no idea what's going on*—at least in terms of results. We are not in control. When we're in wilderness we are not given answers. And sometimes we aren't given directions. There is no Google maps or GPS for wilderness times. By design.

So during the 39 (literally or figuratively) there is often a lot of silence, a lot of wondering and wandering, some questioning, and a lot of trusting that is asked of us and needed for the journey. There may even be times when we feel like God is absent. This is actually a common experience. I've experienced it, and perhaps you have experienced it at some point in your life. The absence of God.

That experience can be disorienting and upsetting, but I take great comfort in the fact that some of our personal heroes also experienced this. After Mother Teresa died and her journals and letters were published, we found out that she experienced deep anguish at God's seeming absence at times during her life. For example, in a letter she wrote to a friend, just before her death,

she says: "Jesus has a very special love for you. But as for me, the darkness and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, I listen and do not hear—the tongue moves [in attempted prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me." Mother Teresa! A woman who seemed as close to God as anyone, and who was so filled with joy and love. Yet who experienced God's absence sometimes.

So sometimes our experience of God's absence is a part of the wilderness journey. This may *seem* uncaring, but God, in love, *is* with us and wants us to seek him all the more, and cling to him more tightly. To learn how to live one day at a time. To learn to trust him—to trust that even if we don't know what's going on, there is purpose; trust that God has **not** actually abandoned us; and trust that God is quietly, even unknowingly (to our conscious mind), strengthening us and preparing us for the next season of life, or some transition. God is always present—it's just that God is sometimes present in a way that is beyond our senses. Under the radar.

In wilderness we have to try to let go of outcomes and learn to trust that God is leading us to where we need to be. Where *God* wants us to be. And is forming and transforming *who* God wants us to be, as his beloved children.

This is why we observe the season of Lent each year. Lent is an annual opportunity to open ourselves to a wilderness experience of some kind. An opportunity to deepen our faith, to renew our lives in Christ and with Christ, as we put ourselves in a position of humility and trust and quiet space to wait upon God and be strengthened. We'll get to Easter after 40 days! We know that. But for now, we experience the 39.

One last brief comment about testing and temptation.

When we find ourselves in wilderness experiences, whether we are led into them or we choose them willingly, testing or temptation may come. And when testing or temptation comes, it's helpful to see from our text that Jesus, in facing it, knew 2 things:

Jesus knew his Bible (so to speak); and Jesus knew his belovedness (because he had just heard the words of identity and affirmation spoken over him at his baptism). In knowing the Scriptures and knowing his belovedness, Jesus was able to stand strong against the assaults on his identity, the questions of "if..." "If you are God's child, prove it..." And so forth.

Jesus used the sacred words and truth of Scriptures to refute the devil and the deceptions thrown at him. And, Jesus possessed internal fortitude because he knew who he was in the Father's eyes, as beloved.

And when we are facing temptation or testing—whether in the wilderness or anywhere—we benefit from God's word in us to help us stand strong, and give us promises to cling to and truths to fortify us—truths about God, and truths about ourselves.

And, we need to know our belovedness. We need to remember what God has said about us, that we are God's beloved child with whom he is well-pleased, who walks with us through all the journeys of life, including wilderness times.