

March 5, 2017: Lent 1: Wilderness



Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season of repentance and preparation for the spiritual rollercoaster leading up to Holy Week, Easter, and beyond. Over the next 6 weeks, we will look deeply at our life and spiritual journey as we reflect on Jesus' ministry leading up to his final week in Jerusalem. Each Sunday, our theme, The Landscape of Lent, will focus on one element taken from the scripture—like wilderness, wind, water, and mud—and we'll explore what we can learn from the journey of Jesus and the elements that surround him along the way.

Wilderness is one of the most important symbols we find throughout the Bible; it is a common backdrop for the stories of our faith. Abraham journeyed from one place to another, seeking the land and future God had promised. After saving the Israelite people from bondage in Egypt, Moses led them through the wilderness for 40 years on a journey to the Promised Land. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, where he fasted for 40 days and then experienced a testing of his convictions and devotion to God. The Biblical wilderness, is physically and spiritually, hard. In the wilderness people don't know where their next meal is going to come from, they don't know where they will lay their head to rest each night, they are at the mercy of nature and anyone or anything they encounter in the wild. In the wilderness there are no distractions and no protections. So it's no surprise that our most powerful scriptural images of God's guidance, God's presence, God's protection, and God's provision come from times that people found themselves in the wilderness.

Each year, we're invited into the Lenten season with this story, written from different perspectives in the various gospels, yet all taking place in the wilderness. Straight out of the baptismal waters, Jesus' is sent on this wilderness journey. Before he began his public ministry, he was gifted with, or forced into, a time to sort out his priorities and to get clear about God's will for his life. In the scripture, we hear that Jesus was tempted by self-satisfaction, fame, and power. He stays true to his calling, turning away from the temptations he faces: to turn a stone into bread and satisfy his hunger, rather than relying on the spiritual food God provides; to jump from the pinnacle of the temple and gain fame as the spectators watch the angels save him from falling; and to gain power over all the kingdoms of the world simply by worshipping one other than God. During his wilderness journey, Jesus fasted, drawing closer to God, listening for God's voice and guidance, and he ultimately passed the tests and temptations that plagued him, making him stronger and more resolute to face his future.

Wilderness time is a part of our lives too. Most of us have lived through a wilderness experience or two, whether it was a journey we chose for ourselves, or a time in our lives that we felt stuck; a time of confusion, disconnection, and desolation. We cannot live and love and engage life in meaningful ways without sometimes ending up in the wilderness. Wilderness times are those when we feel we are tested to our limits. We speak of hunger, thirst, and longing in the wilderness, an emptiness of heart and spirit that we seek desperately to assuage.

In the movie *WILD*, Reece Witherspoon plays a woman named Cheryl who has experienced a failed marriage and the death of her mother, and has lost just about all hope. After years of reckless, destructive behavior, she makes a rash decision. With absolutely no experience, driven only by sheer determination, Cheryl hikes more than a thousand miles of the Pacific Crest Trail, alone. *WILD* powerfully captures the terrors and joys on a wilderness journey that maddens, strengthens, and ultimately heals her.

The same was true for my most transformative wilderness experience. In a season of deep despair, when my engagement came to a crashing end and within three months I lost my job, I felt like I had failed at life and I didn't know who I was or what I was supposed to do next. Immediately I began looking for the same kind of job, teaching high school science, just in a new place, but it didn't feel right... something had been missing, not only from my unhealthy relationship, but also from my career choice. But what was I supposed to do? Could I really change course at this point or was I stuck? I decided to "take a year off from life" (as I called it), to put my teaching career on hold and take time to wrestle with the tough question of who I was, and who I wanted to be... I gave myself time to live into this in between space, a wilderness time for questions rather than answers, a time for dreaming and saying, "What if?" At the end of the year, after many hours spent with my family, with a gifted mentor, and reflecting on my own, I applied to Drew Seminary and began my journey toward ordained ministry... I moved out of that wilderness and back into reality... ready for a new journey, one that looked entirely different and held a new sense of hope and purpose.

Wilderness times come. But they don't stay. They're not permanent. Wilderness times generally mark the end of one phase and the beginning of a new one—time between two seasons—a time of transition and change. Jesus' life was about to go through a BIG change; he was about to start his public ministry, challenging the powers that be, calling people to repentance and life transformation, and sharing a message of love and healing wherever he went. This liminal space, a challenging and lonely time of testing in the Judean wilderness, gave way to a new beginning—the beginning of his public ministry. It prepared him and strengthened him in a way that perhaps nothing else could.

New beginnings stand at the heart of this gospel message. No matter who we are or what we've done, no matter whether the wilderness is of our own making or not, God is present with us in powerful ways through these seasons and can lead us through, and out of them. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, whatever that might look like for each of us, we must not lose hope! There is a way out of the wilderness and a new beginning on the horizon. But we can't get there without first traveling through, facing the temptations, the self-doubt, the struggle from within and without that accompanies this wilderness landscape.

As painful as wilderness experiences are, they can yield more spiritual growth than the good times. They can be times of learning about ourselves, about God, about what is most important, and about where life is headed. Without that time of reflection, taking stock, and learning—whether in the wilderness or not—life can just go along without much thought, intentionality, or growth. When we find ourselves in the wilderness... and trust me, at some point, we will, I pray that we have the faith, hope and perseverance to take each moment for the gift it is... That we are willing to live into the questions...

wilderness questions like: What is God calling me to do and be? What do I need to learn about myself and God? Where do my gifts and joy meet the needs of the world around me? How can I love God and my neighbors even more?

May we journey deep into the wilderness, without fear, but with hope and always with God's love. Amen.