

Sermon TUMC: 1 March 2020

Into the Wilderness

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness ...

We have arrived at the church season of Lent. This is the time when we commemorate the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. Now, we intentionally step away from the activity of our daily lives, slow down, and open our hearts and minds to the voice of God.

This Sunday, we also begin a new sermon series entitled “Show Us” which focusses on our desire to better understand who God is and who we are. We will look for the places in our lives where God is inviting us into a closer relationship. If you wish to use a daily devotional, there is a Lenten Guided Prayer package that accompanies this called “Show us the light in the shadows” which you can get from the TUMC administrator or download from the website. Peter Haresnape will also be leading a weekly small group prayer meeting beginning on Tuesday.

Today, I invite you to explore with me the idea of wilderness.

Our reading today tells us the story of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, which comes immediately after Jesus is baptized by John. Matthew tells us: *“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.”* Mark has an even more robust and urgent version: He says: *“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”* So, it is clear that what is about to happen is a pressing part of God’s plan.

Forty days later, when Jesus leaves the wilderness, he is ready to begin his public ministry. He walks by the Sea of Galilee and say to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me and I will send you out to fish for people,” and they drop their nets to follow him. He calls James and John who are mending their nets and they immediately leave their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants. Over the past months, as we’ve delved into the stories of women in the Bible, we learned of the profound importance placed on the preservation of family, and the deep sacrifices that the relatives of even a dead man would make just so that man would have one son to carry on his line. So, what a shocking and poignant image we have here, of a father being deprived of both his sons, abandoned among his torn nets.

What incredible charisma would Jesus have had to have in order to command this kind of dramatic response? What happened during those forty days?

The notion of wilderness can evoke solitude, loneliness, and utter desolation, of being separated from all human comfort and help. Matthew tells us that Jesus fasts for forty days, so we understand that his physical self is reduced to bare primal need, that he may be on the verge of death. And at that moment, when Jesus is at his most vulnerable, he is tested again and again.

In reflecting on this challenging story, I wrestled with the different versions given to us by the Gospel writers and I have to confess that, rather than the verses that I was supposed to preach on from Matthew, I felt increasingly drawn to the version Mark gives which is wonderfully succinct, and to me, even more compelling because of that.

In Mark chapter 1, verse 13, it says just this:

...and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tested by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 1: 13)

This version is simultaneously short on detail, and yet, more concrete. We get no specifics about the temptations, none of the trading back and forth of scripture verses with Satan that Matthew describes, but we have this mention of wild animals. What's that all about? We don't even have a linear story arc, that is, that Jesus was tempted, that he overcame the temptations, and then he was attended by angels. Instead, I think we could read Mark as saying that these things are happening at the same time: he is being tested by Satan, he is with the wild animals, and angels attend him.

I found the mention of the wild animals particularly curious. At first glance, this seemed a strange aside, and I had assumed it was meant to express that Jesus was in mortal danger alone in the desert. But as I read further, I learned that Mark might be saying the exact opposite; some scholars suggest that Mark is using this to portray Jesus is a second Adam who is in harmony with nature. The Bible is wonderfully multi-layered, so that images and phrases in one story can serve as literary wormholes linking it to another story.¹ But, as much as I love a good metaphor, it seems to me that not everything is metaphorical, or at least not only metaphorical. Because of course the animals of the wilderness exist in their own right, not merely to be used be symbols in human narratives. It seems to me that these animals are actual animals, and they are Jesus' companions in the desert. And I think this sense of the text is in sympathy with what Mark has said a just few verses earlier. His story of John the Baptist, the voice "crying out in the wilderness," is rich with references to the help of animals. John is clothed in camel hair and eats wild locusts and honey.

The Judean desert, far from being desolate, is rich with animal life, full of amazing creatures that are exquisitely suited to their demanding environment. There's the delicate Dorcas gazelle that can run almost 100 km/hour and may go its entire life without taking a sip of water; there's the sand fox whose thickly padded feet allow it to run across the hot sand; the Nubian ibex that nimbly leaps from ledge to ledge; the Agama lizard whose males turn a brilliant electric blue; the sand-coloured dune cat; the spiky hedgehog; and the tiny jerboa, a long-tailed big-eared super rodent capable of leaping three meters in a single hop; and far above it all, the flutter of over five hundred species of birds. Jesus may be far from all human comfort and help, but he is never alone; even in his time of testing, God sends angels to minister to him and surrounds him with the creatures of his beautiful creation. Jesus cannot escape his time of trial, but he is not forsaken.

I found the word "crucible" is really useful here. The dictionary tells us that one definition of crucible is "a time of severe trial" which fits Jesus's story perfectly. This sense of the

word originally comes from chemistry where a crucible is an uncovered bowl made of porcelain or iron. A crucible is a vessel in which transformation happens. A raw material, such as a metal-bearing ore, is placed in the bowl and treated with high heat. This creates a vigorous reaction. The impurities in the ore are either released into the air or settle out as a layer of slag. This waste can then be skimmed off the top to reveal a purified metal such as gold or silver.

So, we can say Jesus is in a crucible—a time of severe trial—and what is burned off are all the distractions and temptations of the world. The wilderness is the place of encounter with God and it is here that Jesus can hear God's voice most clearly.

I suspect that each of us connect with this idea of a crucible, that we have experienced a time of trial at some point in our lives. Perhaps you are in one right now. I can't presume to understand what it has meant to you to be in that wilderness, but I can perhaps offer something of my own experience.

I realized that, over the years, the place I have glimpsed wilderness most clearly has been in hospital rooms, those of people I loved, and once, my own. Fifteen years ago, I was in an Intensive Care Unit in that precarious threshold between death and life. Gary Harder, our pastor, came to minister to us and I will always remember his powerful observation that that hospital room was a holy place. In that realm of blood, tubes and beeping monitors, the hiss of oxygen tanks and the sharp scent of disinfectant, in that place of vulnerability, sorrow, pain, fear and loss, in the midst of all the suffering, God was there.

That hospital room was a place of encounter for me, a crucible, where the distractions and the temptations of the world were burned off like so much dross. After all, what are gluttony and lust when your organ systems are shutting down. Vanity and pride are ridiculous when you are stuck with IVs, unable to move a muscle. Greed and envy lose their power, for what point is there in counting your gold when you can't even count on your next breath.

In the wilderness we are shorn of all the usual activities and compulsions that fill our days, the many ways in which we distract ourselves from God. All the obsessions, ambitions, goals and grudges that might have seemed so important only the day before are suddenly put into proper perspective. The world's prizes are stretched out before us and revealed to be the puny things they really are.

In the wilderness, we cannot hide from ourselves. We are confronted with our own failings. All the things that we have done and have left undone come into stark relief. But it is precisely in accepting how far we fall short that we gain a deeper awareness of God's grace, a more profound understanding that we are beloved children of God. Here, thoroughly undone, we can come to rest in the knowledge that God's love is, and has always been, with us.

The theologian Henri Nouwen tells the story of St. Anthony who was born around the year

251 in Egypt. Anthony followed the call of God to retreat into complete solitude in the desert. There, he experienced terrible trials. Anthony emerged, transformed, twenty years later and when he did, people recognized that he had become a balanced, authentic, and whole person. He radiated gentleness and love. Many people from all walks of life flocked to him for comfort, healing, and guidance. And the interesting thing was that he no longer needed to be in seclusion from the world. Solitude was now “a quality of his heart,” “an inner disposition” that couldn’t be disturbed by all of the people who were coming to ask his help. He now held the wilderness inside himself, and it was an expansive space into which other people could be invited.²

Do you know how dancers can perform fabulous pirouettes without getting dizzy? Many of our talented dancers are away on the youth retreat today but if they were here, they’d be able to tell us you do it by a technique called “spotting.” What you have to do is choose a focus, and it can’t be another person or anything else that might move; you choose one fixed point and keep your eyes trained on it, no matter which way your body is moving.

Jesus emerged after the forty days in the wilderness full of the power of the Spirit, transformed, and ready to begin his public ministry. He had gained a true understanding of who he was, and he was unshakeable because his eyes were trained on God.

I would love to be able to tell you that I emerged from my crucible permanently transformed, filled with light and love and never again falling short. Sadly, that is not the case. That’s the hard part, isn’t it? Hanging onto our hard-won insights once we’ve returned to the bustle of daily life. I think that’s where an intentional devotional practice can help us to stay connected to that encounter with God.

The crucible makes a striking metaphor and the image of gold being purified in a single blast of fiery heat might work very well for some people, but for others of us, I wonder if a better metaphor might be something more along the lines of what a biochemist has to do to purify an organic substance. With a complex biological molecule like insulin or DNA, you can’t just blast it with high heat because you would destroy its activity. You have to coax it out through a long, multi-stage procedure. You have to mash it, blend it, dissolve it, filter it, spin it in a centrifuge, evaporate and distill it, add salt solution, add acid solution, adjust the pH, scrape all the goop that precipitates out and filter it yet again. And at each step, if you do it right, a few more of the impurities will be swept away. But it is a long, painstaking process.

This Lent, as we mark Jesus’ forty days in the desert, let’s also remember that he spent forty nights there. And what is the most striking thing about being out in the wilderness at night? To me, it is that canopy of stars, that brilliant vault of sky. It is so vivid, so dynamic, and so incredibly bright.

As 21st century city dwellers, the starry sky is often lost to us in the orange glow of our street lights. At other times, we are kept from seeing it by the blaze of the sun or the cover of clouds. As individuals and as a church, we have meetings, and schedules, and long lists of good and needful things to do. And maybe there are times when we are too much distracted by the glittering amusements and empty accolades of this world and we go about, heads bent, following the devices and desires of our own hearts.

We may not avoid our times of trial. But perhaps it is when we are deepest in the dark of wilderness that we most clearly see what is always there, beyond the clouds and glare: that starry sky, our glimpse of the infinite and the eternal.

Here's one final question: why is a crucible called a crucible? The dictionary tells us it is because it took its shape from a vessel that was called a *crucibulum* in medieval Latin. A *crucibulum* was a night lamp. But why was this night lamp called a **cruci-bulum**? Its because it was the lamp that burned in front of the crucifix.

This Lent, may we follow as God leads us to a place of encounter. May we carry the wilderness within us when we emerge. And may our crucible serve as a light in the dark, illuminating the cross of Jesus. AMEN

Scripture Readings

Psalm 32

- 1 How happy is the one whose wrongs are forgiven,
whose sin is hidden from sight.
- 2 How happy is the person whose sin the Eternal will not take into account.[b]
How happy are those who no longer lie, to themselves or others.

- 3 When I refused to admit my wrongs, I was miserable,
moaning and complaining all day long
so that even my bones felt brittle.
- 4 Day and night, Your hand kept pressing on me.
My strength dried up like water in the summer heat;
You wore me down.

- 5 When I finally saw my own lies,
I owned up to my sins before You,
and I did not try to hide my evil deeds from You.
I said to myself, "I'll admit all my sins to the Eternal,"
and You lifted and carried away the guilt of my sin.

- 6 So let all who are devoted to You
speak honestly to You now, while You are still listening.
For then when the floods come, surely the rushing water
will not even reach them.
- 7 You are my hiding place.
You will keep me out of trouble
and envelop me with songs that remind me I am free.

- 8 I will teach you and tell you the way to go and how to get there;
I will give you good counsel, and I will watch over you.
- 9 But don't be stubborn and stupid like horses and mules
who, if not reined by leather and metal,
will run wild, ignoring their masters.

- 10 Tormented and empty are wicked and destructive people,
but the one who trusts in the Eternal is wrapped tightly in His gracious love.
- 11 Express your joy; be happy in Him, you who are good and true.
Go ahead, shout and rejoice aloud, you whose hearts are honest and straightforward.

Matthew 4:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” **4** But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6** 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.’”

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is 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** and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” **10** Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

¹ For example, see Jaap Doedens, “Literary Wormholes: Wild Animals and Angels in Mark 1:13,” *Sárospataki Füzetek* 20.2 (2016): 53–66.

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The way of the heart: connecting with God through prayer, wisdom, and silence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), pp. 9-23.