

Deep in the Wilderness: Called to deep healing

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In the Wilderness

We are in Lent season and TUMC is meditating on the theme, “Deep calls to deep.” This week we are entering into the wilderness to reflect on our lives deeply. Aldred and Josh guided us to imagine being in the wilderness through the video. The image and the sound help us to feel what it looks like being in the wilderness, especially for those who grew up in cities, including me. Wilderness is natural place that has not been modified by human activities. In the wilderness, sometimes we feel awe toward nature. We are overwhelmed by the beauty and vastness of nature and realize how small creatures we are. On the other hand, since we have been living in a human-made environment for a long time, being in the wilderness also means being in an unfamiliar, uncomfortable, unpredictable and uncontrollable situation. This lack of sense of control evokes our fear, anxiety and powerlessness. Wilderness is a place where we can see our naked reality and realize we are limited and vulnerable beings.

In that sense, we experience wilderness, even when we are not necessarily in nature. In this Covid-19 situation, human beings are exposed to a danger that is caused by the invisible virus. We are living in a quite unfamiliar, uncomfortable, unpredictable and uncontrollable situation. Even before the pandemic, humans have suffered from all different kinds of disease. In our beds, when no one can soothe our pain and can't fall asleep, we feel like being in the wilderness. When I entered into a foreign land, where I could not use my knowledge and experience that I had accumulated for my entire life, I felt like being in the wilderness. In the hospital room, where I was just waiting for my mom's last breath, I was in the wilderness. In my neighborhood, lots of homeless people are wandering around the closed shelters, they are in the wilderness. In this wilderness, we, human beings, suffer. We realize our limitation, and so we yearn and search for hope.

Israelites in the Wilderness

The people of Israel were led to the wilderness. At first, the journey began with great excitement. They escaped from the oppressive empire. They are now free and no longer slaves. However, this excitement did not last long. They experienced thirst, hunger, and exhaustion, and soon, they began to grumble. It is quite understandable. When my husband Pablo was a young and enthusiastic single man in Paraguay, he was passionate to find a sincere Christian community. He heard about a group of Mennonites living as an intentional community. He learned that they were living in a place called Chaco. It was 4-5 hours away from his home. He started his journey with excitement to meet these sincere followers of Jesus. He arrived at the nearest bus stop from the community. Then, he started to walk. It was a sunny and hot summer day. There was no shade because all the trees were very short. Unfortunately, he did not bring a water bottle. After walking almost one hour in the place referred as “green hell,” he could have died of dehydration. It was not anymore, an exciting journey. He was desperate. He finally arrived at this Mennonite community, and his first word to these people whom he eagerly wanted to meet was “Agua, por favor.” “Water, please.” When we face difficulties in our journey and pain overwhelms, the initial excitement fades out, and we often forget why we started our journey. Wilderness reveals our weakness, limitations and wounds clearly.

Israelites’ grumbling is somehow understandable. The wilderness was definitely not comfortable like they used to live. They were thirsty and hungry. The book of Exodus and Numbers are full of Israelites’ complaints. In the wilderness, they suffered and grumbled. In each occasion, God has faithfully provided what they needed. God gave them water by changing bitter water to sweet water. God gave them manna and quails. However, as the journey was prolonged, their grumbling turned into rebellion against God. They said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” and the Bible interprets this action and reaction as “sin” (Ps 78:17). Then, Israelites suffer from

the consequence of their sin. As we read Numbers 21, God sent poisonous snakes among the people, so many Israelites died. In the midst of this suffering, Israelites confessed their sin and asked for healing. So, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, lived.

The God of Compassion

This passage gives us some difficulty to understand the character of God. It portrays God as someone who gives both pain and healing. This makes us read the book of Numbers again more closely. When we read the book of Numbers, it is full of the stories of Israelites complaining to God but at the same time, it is also full of the stories of God's accompaniment. There is a story of building a Tent where God dwelled. Israelites were able to see the presence of God which was shown as cloud and a pillar like fire along the way. God was not just sitting in a comfortable couch in heaven and watching over them to see if they obeyed God or not. God walked every step with them and suffered with them. I believe that God also suffered with them even in the moment when some of the Israelites died because of the consequence of their sin, as parents suffer with their suffering children. Because God suffered with them, God was the one who really wanted to heal them, and God immediately provided a path to live when the people returned and prayed to God. In the wilderness, they suffered and grumbled. In the wilderness, God suffered with them and healed them.

As I meditate on this passage, the word "compassion" stood out. Com means "with," and passion means "suffer." So, compassion literally means to suffer with. The characteristic of God that the bible reveals to us is the God of compassion, God who suffers with us. Actually, suffering is a part of human life. We are finite beings. Wilderness simply reveals our limitation more plainly. So, being in the wilderness is the time where we admit our weakness, limitations and wounds. Whether our suffering is caused by our sin or not, since God suffers with us, God is the one who deeply desires to comfort us and heal us.

This compassionate heart of God was fully manifested by Jesus. Jesus lived among people, suffered with people, died with people, and resurrected with people. Jesus truly knew God's heart, so he said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus lived out God's compassionate heart and gave his life to heal the world eternally. This is hope for us, humans.

The Power of Compassion

During this pandemic, most people are going through emotional difficulties, and so I decided to provide online psychotherapy services with my social work license. As I prepared for the practice, I studied and read some books. One of the books that spoke to me a lot was a book written by a Korean psychiatrist Hyesin Chong. She has observed people suffering from mental health issues for more than 30 years, and found out that one of the main reasons that people suffer mentally is because they feel like "I am nothing and meaningless." When people feel that their being is not fully affirmed, crisis begins. In a highly competitive society, people are evaluated based on what they have achieved. In this atmosphere of being evaluated and judged, people cannot feel fully affirmed as who they are. This makes them feel like "I am nothing and meaningless." This brings identity crisis, depression and anxiety. I see many immigrants suffering from this crisis because the immigration process makes them feel like "I am nothing and meaningless." They were cut off from their roots, relationships, language, and culture. They experience an existential crisis. The psychiatrist said that people who suffer from this existential crisis are like people suffocating due to the lack of oxygen, so they need what she called "psychological CPR" as those who are in an urgent situation who need medical CPR. She said that the psychological CPR is fully affirming just as who they are and empathizing with them. In other words, it is to be compassionate. Fully being present and compassionate with people facing an existential crisis works just like medical CPR

when it revives dying people. Compassionate actions tell people in crisis “who said that you are nothing? you are still important. You must live.”

Similar to this idea, psychologist Christin Neff developed self-compassion practices. Her research found that the practices reduce anxiety, depression, stress, perfectionism, shame, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders. Self-compassion is treating ourselves kindly just as we treat our loved ones in a kind manner. So, when we suffer, instead of being critical to ourselves, we need to acknowledge our suffering and talk kindly to ourselves. “This is a moment of suffering. This is really hard. Suffering is a part of life. It is not abnormal to feel this way. It is going to be okay. You will be well.” I also found that this self-compassion exercise is really helpful for those who are undergoing hardships. This is like self-psychological CPR.

As I meditated on today’s passage and meditated on who God is, I found that we have the greatest source of compassion. That is the God of compassion. God is the one who walks together as we walk in the wilderness. God is the one who suffers with us as we suffer. God is the one who is willing to be compassionate toward us and provide the path of life. In the wilderness, we truly realize that we are human beings, thus limited beings. This reality also leads us to fully experience the compassion of God. In the wilderness, we suffer, grieve, and despair, but in the wilderness, God also suffers with us, heals us and empowers us.

The Gesture of Compassion

As I wrap up, I would like to invite you to do a brief exercise. I adapted this exercise from Dr. Kristin Neff’s Gestures of Compassion. If you want, feel free to change your Zoom screen to gallery view so that when we do this exercise, you can see that we are doing this together and that you are not alone.

First, with both hands, make tight fists. This shows how we react when we encounter wilderness. We are in survival mode. We are very nervous and afraid of any harm that might hurt us. Let’s slowly open our hands and relax. Then, tell ourselves, “I know it is hard. This is scary. This is a moment of suffering.” With our open hands,

simply accept the reality, our suffering and our limitations. We are human beings.....

But, the good news is that we are not alone in this wilderness. Let's put both our hands on our chest and feel the warmth of our hands. Even in the midst of wilderness, let's remember that God is suffering with us and God is willing to lead to the path of life. Feel the warmth of God, feel the love of God, and tell yourself in your minds as if God is telling you: "I am the God of compassion. I am the God of love. I am walking with you. I am listening to you. I love you." Now, let's look at the people on the screen. Let's share our compassion with people who have been isolated for a long time. Make a gesture of a hug and send your love. Yes. We are not alone. The community of God is together even in the wilderness.

Reflection Questions

1. During this Lent season, where do you sense God's presence?
2. Reflecting on your wilderness experience, what gave you hope and what sustained you?
3. Toward whom and where is God calling you to practice compassion?