

Wilderness and Promise

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Year B

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Have you ever been lost in the wilderness? I can't say I have much experience. Despite having pretty much zero sense of direction, even when I find myself, say, lost in Hillsborough, all I have to do is pull up an app and my phone is ready with turn-by-turn directions. The closest I came was on a hiking trip during a semester I spent in Oregon in college—I've mentioned this hiking trip in a sermon before, probably because it's the only real overnight hiking I've done. Much as I'd like to believe otherwise, experience (and winter-fair skin) pegs me as a bit of an indoorsy type.

So on this trip we had a guide who did the hike every year—a real adult—and half a dozen inexperienced Midwestern college students. We were the middle group—not the “experienced” ones who went to the Tetons, but also not the ones who camped at the edge of a lake for a week.

Anyway, all was fine and dandy and glorious until, a couple days in, we found that the usual path had washed away, which led to hiking across a boulder field, climbing an incline so steep we had to clutch at roots and branches to keep from falling, and, ultimately, coming face to face with a cliff. We were lost, we were in the wilderness, but the next day we hiked around the cliff and picked up the trail again, and the whole trip lasted only a week, with nary a wild beast or a wily devil to be seen.

Wilderness is not always literal, though. Most of the time we find this wilderness in our own lives, in our own souls—and that's what brings us to Lent. Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, we get the same story, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. This is our introduction to a season when, like Jesus, we spend 40 days recognizing our own wilderness.

I've heard people say they don't like Lent because it's too depressing. They don't like all the doom and gloom in the readings, they don't like being asked to consider their sins and repent. They don't like the idea of discipline or fasting. And they really don't like the lack of cheery music. It's true that Lent is not a time of light and cheer, but I think that's part of why it is so important.

Because having times of being out in the wilderness with the wild beasts is part of what it is to be human, to live in the world. For many, the last year has been a time of wilderness—concerns about health, about livelihood, about family and friends. Feelings of apathy, anxiety, or depression as days and weeks and months bled into one another, alike in their lack of the things that once brought joy and delight.

This year has also held plenty of natural disasters, acts of violence, accidents, unrest...this year has held evil—in the world, in our communities, in our families, in our own hearts. Like Jesus, we know wilderness and trial; we know what it is to be with the wild beasts.

I said that the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness is read each year on the first Sunday of Lent. It is, but each year in the three-year cycle of readings, it's a different telling of the story—and this year's is a little different. While Matthew and Luke give lengthy descriptions of Jesus' wilderness experience and various trials, Mark compresses the whole thing—baptism, trial, and calling to public ministry—into just a few verses. Perhaps that's because these three are inextricably bound up together. The Christian life and calling is not easy, not a quick solution to our questions and problems; it is a plunge into a wild and wondrous life that will also include wilderness and trial.

Lent is a reminder of this, a time to remember how frail we are, remember how fragile life is, recognize the ways we fail and fall short. But it's not a time to do these things as ends in themselves. It's a time to be honest and strip away distractions and false beliefs, to dive deep beneath the surface where the light starts to fade, so that we might make room in our lives to refocus on what God is doing, on how God is working God's purpose out. It's a time to make room for hope.

The Spirit present at Jesus' baptism indeed drives him into the wilderness, where Satan and the wild beasts are waiting, but Jesus is not left alone or unprepared. This wilderness time comes *after* Jesus has received the baptismal affirmation that he is God's son, God's beloved, who is well-pleasing to God. It comes *after* the Spirit has descended upon him. And during his testing, he is not left comfortless, but is waited on by angels. When he returns to begin his ministry, it is with the event of John's arrest, but it is with the knowledge that this is in the fullness of God's time, when all is ripe and ready.

So it is with us. We also have the promise of an identity as beloved children of God. We also have the presence of the Spirit to guide. We also keep the company of angels. And we also can act in the confidence of living in God's time. Yes, we will be tempted and tested. We will face great darkness and wilderness that may feel unending. But Lent reminds us that these times of testing do not typically last forever, that light triumphs over darkness and love is more powerful than hate. And most of all, Lent reminds us that God is present with us in the wilderness. We know that Lent ends with Easter, we go on with the confidence that because Jesus was raised from the dead, nothing can ultimately defeat those aligned with God's love and life.

It's fitting that this Gospel reading is paired with the story of God's covenant with Noah—a connection that's sort of made for us in 1 Peter. If you'll remember the story of the flood, everything on earth had become so violent and terrible, so offensive to God's justice, that God decided to destroy everything and start fresh. But there's tension between God's judgement and God's mercy, because God looks on Noah and Noah's family and sees something worth redeeming. It wasn't because Noah was perfect—read on just a few verses from today's

passage and you'll see that the first action noted is that Noah plants a vineyard and gets blackout drunk—a real stand-up guy.

No, Noah isn't perfect, but God still sees something worth redeeming. None of us is perfect, either. Our world certainly isn't perfect. This darkness and fallenness is something we face regularly, but particularly during this season of Lent. And yet—amid all that darkness, God sees something worth redeeming.

There is calling, too, wrapped up in Lent and the idea of wilderness. Just as Jesus knew his calling to ministry, we all are called to embrace the opportunity we have to continue the work of God's kingdom and to share the hope we have been given with all God's children.

We see this in the promises we make at baptism, in our baptismal covenant. Just as we, like Jesus, receive assurance of our identity as God's beloved children, so also we agree (or have someone agree on our behalf) to work with Jesus to renew the world from the inside out.

We promise to continue in worship, to resist evil and repent when we don't, to share the Gospel, to love others and seek to find Jesus in everyone, and to work for justice and peace for all God's children.

Our baptism compels us into the wilderness and compels us into our calling. We are compelled to sit with the darkness, to acknowledge evil, to look death in the face—but we are called not just to acknowledgement but to action. With Jesus, we are called to shine light into the darkness, to resist evil, and to proclaim that death doesn't have the last word.

We do this work in our lives by making room to see where God is at work, by being vulnerable to darkness and death, and to one another, by being open to love even though that also means being open to pain. We do this work in the world by striving for change that will bring about justice and peace, by actively listening to the perspectives of others and seeking understanding, by working together for the good of all.

This journey of Lent begins with wilderness and promise, with pain and purpose. You are already a beloved child of God. God is already present with you in all of life. The question as we enter this season is: How will you respond? Will you be willfully oblivious to what God is doing in your life, unwilling to change the life you're accustomed to or exit your comfort zone, or will you be open to God's call and aware of God's action in your life and the world? Will you be frozen in the face of the darkness that is in the world, or will you claim your place as God's child and work to build the kingdom?

With God's promise, the wilderness can be a place of healing, growth, and strength. May it be so.