

Ready for a Change: Falling into Wilderness

Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15

First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † Wilderness. Wild beasts. Temptation. Yes, it sounds like the first Sunday in Lent. But it also sounds like real life. The journey of Lent begins this year as always with Jesus in the wilderness.
- † From that big, emotional high of his baptism, when the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and then he heard those wonderfully affirming words from God saying, “You are my Son, my Beloved one, with you I am well pleased.”
- † From this, Mark tells us, the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days, and where he was with the wild beasts.
- † Matthew tells us that Jesus was “led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” But Mark makes it more emphatic: “Immediately the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness.”
- † But how could God do this? Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation...,” so what is God up to? We don’t get driven into temptation because God won’t drive us anywhere we can’t get by ourselves.
- † And God knows that we don’t learn much about ourselves or about God in security and abundance. We mostly learn in adversity and hardship, in reversal and loss. In other words, in the wilderness.
- † That’s where Jesus learned who and whose he was, too. Wilderness is the place where we have nothing, where everything we used to count

- on is gone. It's the place we feel weak, where most of our coping mechanisms don't work anymore.
- † One writer, Susan Fleming McGurgan, says: Mark's gospel hurls us, ready or not, into a lonely and barren wilderness—a desert—where everything either bites or burns or stings.”
 - † Wilderness, though, in this case, is more about a psychic landscape than a physical one. Of course physical issues can help create that spiritual proving ground of the wilderness.
 - † The problem with most wilderness experiences is that they are uncomfortable, stretching, painful times. It was certainly that for Jesus. For us, wilderness times may also be full of fear, confusion, times of no direction, riddled with anxiety and uncertainty.
 - † Wilderness wanderings are often triggered by life's trauma, deaths, health problems, clinical depression—you name it. Your wilderness may be a place where you aren't sure where God is at all—what John of the Cross called the “dark night of the soul.”
 - † The paradox, though, is that it is in these wilderness, dark night of the soul times, that we become vulnerable to, open to, change, to salvation. The good news is that God often makes our lives over into something very different through our journeys through the wilderness.
 - † Life is full of endings, wilderness experiences of reshaping and transformation, and new beginnings in which our lives are never the same. The reason that Scripture is full of wilderness experiences is that God is in the transformation business, and wilderness is about change. Our wilderness experiences, however big or small, are part of God taking us out of the old and leading us into the new.

- † They key to the wilderness journey is to let yourself fall down at times. I know that sounds strange. But don't tune out and stay with me for a minute. Nobody likes to fall, I know.
- † You've been taught that "standing tall and strong and refusing to bow or bend is not only a mark of success, it's a clear moral virtue. Which it sometimes is. But at some point it's not a virtuous fortitude anymore. At some point it becomes a blind refusal to wake up, to listen, to recognize that we've reached that inevitable point in life where all our strivings are futile. We're fighting the rescuer."
(Andersen)
- † The other night Tom and I listened to the spiritual writer Parker Palmer on Bill Moyers' Journal on PBS. I've read Palmer's books, but I had never seen him speak before. Both Tom and I were so impressed by his wisdom, his gentleness, his presence.
- † In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer writes about going to Outward Bound. You know that that sort of physical wilderness experience is supposed to build your confidence by breaking through your comfort zone, making you rethink what you need to accomplish a goal.
- † As the leader walked Parker Palmer to the edge of a cliff that dropped 110 feet, he expected a nice morning of instruction on getting down the cliff safely and carefully.
- † Instead the instructor tied a little line to his waist—a line that seemed to be sort of worn and unraveling in places, and then the instructor said: "Start rappelling down the cliff." "Do what?" said Palmer. The instructor said, "Just do it."

- † And so he pushed off—dropping four feet and crashing into the rock face. The instructor looked over the edge and said, “Parker, I don’t think you’ve got the hang of this.” And Palmer said, “No kidding. Now what?”
- † The instructor said: “The only way to do this is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight is on your feet.”
- † Palmer said, “I knew he was wrong of course. I knew the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried it again my way”—and slammed with bone-jarring force into the next ledge four feet down.
- † So the instructor said, “Parker, I know it’s counterintuitive, but lean out, lean free.” Palmer writes, “The next step was a very big one, but I took it—and wonder of wonders, it worked. I leaned back into empty space, eyes fixed on the heavens in prayer, made tiny, tiny moves with my feet and started descending the rock face.”
- † That’s wilderness, when you’re crushed against that rock face and you’re holding on for dear life, and you know this holding on has to be the best way, no matter what the voice from above is telling you.
- † When we’re in that wilderness...when the bottom falls out or feels like it’s going to, when life whipsaws and we end up on our backs—when the money runs out, when depression descends like a fog, then we have a choice.
- † We can stay with it, until we learn how to stop hugging the rock, until we learn how to lean out and look up, how to trust something beyond ourselves, or we can run.

- † Have you ever thought about the truth that Jesus didn't have to stay in the wilderness? The Spirit drove him there, but couldn't have he found his way back home again if he felt like it? He could have said, "How stupid is this, to suffer and struggle this way?" "What kind of God would lead me here anyway?"
- † But that's not what he did or said. He dwelt in the wilderness with the wild beasts of fear, of despair, of depression, of abandonment, of doubt. Until God (the angels?) broke through and Jesus figured out who he really was and what he meant to be and do.
- † But what if we seem to be stuck in our wilderness? What if it's not a place of transformation? What if it is just where we live? What if we can't be led out of it to purpose and meaning?
- † Back to Susan Fleming McGurgan: "The truth is, sometimes, no matter where we live, no matter how far we travel, the desert is all we can see. Sometimes, despite what the weather report or average rainfall may indicate, we find ourselves right in the middle of the desert: blinded, disoriented, sunburned, just about dying of thirst.
- † Sometimes the desert feels so familiar, that we can name every shriveled plant, every venomous snake, every blistering ray, every irritating little grain of sand. Sometimes, the wilderness can feel a lot like home."
- † What then? Here are some ideas from my own experience in the wilderness times of my life:
- † First, pay attention and name that this is indeed a wilderness time and that you aren't meant to stay there. Expect God to lead you out of it. Listen for the still small voice of God calling you to somewhere else in your life, to transformation.

- † Second, know and trust that God is in that wilderness with you. You may not be able to feel God’s presence; wilderness times are often like that. This is when falling back into God’s presence—faith and trust—are your best friends.
- † Third, follow Jesus’ example in today’s scripture: pay attention and let the Spirit help you obey God’s Word and resist temptation. Stand up to the distractions, lies, and resentments that come in wilderness times. And like Jesus pray, worship, give thanks, and listen for who you are called to be—a beloved child of God.
- † Finally, be with other faith friends who have a view of the far side of the wilderness that you may not be able to see. Be with spiritual friends who can point the way for you. Let this community be your faith until you rediscover your own.
- † Let us be your strength when you are weak. Let us pray for you when your prayers just echo in your heart and seem to go nowhere. Let us be the angels (some angels, I know) who minister to you, as Jesus was ministered to by the angels in his wilderness.
- † Once you get to the other side of your wilderness, you’ll have all the time in the world to be a ministering angel for someone else, by God’s grace.
- † Now let’s listen to the end of Susan Fleming McGurgan’s sermon in a poem:

But there’s something else
true
about deserts—
something that Mark wants us to hear.

Jesus has been there first.

That's the Good News of Mark's opening scenes.
No desert on earth is so remote,
 so barren,
 so seemingly inhospitable to life,
that Jesus hasn't walked there first.

And his presence in the wilderness reminds us
that there's something else
true
about deserts.

Despite all appearances to the contrary,
the wilderness is filled with life.

A handful of desert soil,
baked and brown,
blowing in the hot wind,
can be filled with hundreds of seeds,
just waiting for a chance to bloom.

That withered plant,
desiccated and dry,
has living roots

reaching deep into the ground.

That empty landscape—
lonely in the harsh light of day,
comes to life in the moonlight
as reptiles and insects emerge from hiding.

Even at it's most desolate,
the desert is always ready to burst into bloom
at the first sign of life-giving water.

Maybe that's why God so often uses the desert
as a place for transformation.
Maybe that's why Jesus emerged
from the waters of baptism
only to be thrust into the wilderness.

This Lent finds many of us
traveling through the desert
wrestling with demons
and tempted by evil.
Some people might look upon that journey
and despair.

But we know the truth about deserts,
don't we?

- † When you find yourself in the wilderness, fall into God’s sure embrace, and trust the Master Mountaineer.
- † As we prepare to receive strength for our wilderness journey with Jesus, we remember that on the night....

Sources:

Rev. David R. Anderson, “The Fortunate Fall,” February 10, 2008, St. Luke’s Parish, Darien, Connecticut.

Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan, Homily, www.mtsm.org

“Father Rob’s Sermons,” www.saintjohnsclearwater.org March 5, 2006.

Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, page 83-84.