

First Sunday in Lent B 2018
Church of the Advent
February 18, 2018
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In the Wilderness



And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

This morning, on this First Sunday of Lent, we gather together with intention, to join each other and the wider Christian community on a journey. For 40 days the Church becomes a kind of travel agency for a gathering band of pilgrims who are looking for an experience of a new place—or an experience of an old familiar place in a new way.

If you have ever taken a professional tour—for weeks or just a weekend—you probably received an itinerary, a detailed schedule of the places you would go and see, and a list of what to pack and bring, along with emergency contacts and recommendations for sturdy comfortable and already broken-in shoes. Tour guides are in the business of wanting you to have a good experience, and their planning and guidance for your trip should draw on the wisdom and experience they have accumulated on many past experiences. The professionals are paid to think of everything, and to make everything go smoothly, so all you have to do is show up for a life-changing experience.

The trip being offered by your Church Travel Agency each Lent is a journey with Jesus—following him from his early ministry in Galilee, through the calling of his disciples, his teachings, his healings, and along his intentional walk to the heart of Jerusalem where the full meaning and purpose of his life is made manifest in his death and resurrection. This past Ash Wednesday, we began this trip with a very old guide book—the Book of Common Prayer. Bidding us to pack our bags with humility, repentance, simplicity, prayer and fasting, we started with the ancient ritual of having our foreheads marked by ashes—to remind ourselves of our mortality, our vulnerability, and our dependence on our God. Today we arrive at our first stop—the wilderness—because this is the first place Jesus went after his Baptism.

Why, we might wonder, did Jesus go into the wilderness first? What good could possibly come from being driven by the Spirit to such a barren wasteland making him vulnerable to wild beasts and the power of Satan? Why would it be necessary for the Son of God to begin his sacrificial journey in a place where he would know hunger and thirst? Wasn't his way going to be difficult enough even when surrounded by friends and supporters?

Luke's and Matthew's gospel stories of Jesus in the wilderness are tales of contest, where Jesus stands up to Satan by passing a test—showing the devil who is boss and who has the real power. Mark's gospel is more spare; he leads us to follow Jesus into the desert as an ascetic—one seeking spiritual enlightenment through self-deprivation and suffering—and Mark says only that Jesus was tempted.

But why here? What kind of a travel agent would lead us to a first stop with no amenities, with wild beasts roaming, without shelter from the broiling heat by day or the freezing cold at night, nothing to eat and a marginal supply of water? What kind of a place *is* the wilderness and why would we *ever* want to go there? Perhaps because the wilderness is someplace more familiar than we would like it to be—imbedded in our biblical heritage.

- Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden of Eden into a wilderness they knew nothing about. They were warned that they would need to make a life out of the dirt—there were no cultivated farms of crops ready to harvest waiting for them.
- Noah, whose story we heard today, sailed into a wilderness of water, *and the flood continued for 40 days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.* (Genesis 6:17)
- Abraham left his home and life as he knew it and entered a wilderness experience he was to know as Canaan. One chapter of Abraham’s story involves Hagar, sent to the wilderness with her son Ishmael to die, finding God’s deliverance instead.
- Moses started his life as an infant being sent off in a basket alone into a wilderness of a river; later God chose him part that river and to take the Israelites into the desert wilderness for 40 years—a whole generation—before he would deliver them to the threshold of the Promised Land.
- Joseph of Nazareth set off with his new young family—away from his town and kin—to the wilderness towards Egypt to save his newborn son from the wrath of a jealous king.
- John the Baptist, who lived on locusts and honey, was the voice who cried out in the wilderness to make way for the One who was to follow.

All of these stories of wilderness wandering—and likely many more— were in the DNA of Jesus. Each of these ancestors had set off to places unknown, to follow the voice of God, to obey and to trust and to do God’s will. Each knew doubt and suffering in their journeys, and each knew redemption, too. Each came to know that their wilderness experience—whether 40 days or 40 years—led them to be more deeply and fully who they were, and who they were meant to be, because that was where they found God—in the wilderness with them. God was in the clouds and the stars and the rocks from which water poured. Angels waited on them, and led them back out of the wilderness to richer, fuller, deeper lives.

What does a wilderness experience mean for us today? Are we meant to drop everything, tie on our boots, and literally trek across the Sahara or the Mojave? Some

people do that sort of thing—walk the entire Appalachian Trail or cross an ocean alone in a sail boat, or climb mountains so tall that humans are not meant even to breathe at their summits. These kinds of wilderness experiences are extraordinary—but not because of the curious capacity of some humans to push themselves beyond the physical and psychological limits of ordinary people. Instead they are extraordinary because in the wilderness, neither knowledge, nor technology, nor training, nor equipment, nor the perfect tour guide, can guarantee success. In the wilderness we learn that we are not—nor do we need to be—in control, because God is. And the angels will wait on us. Regardless of what happens, God is with us.

The wilderness for most of us is not about natural wonders, or geography. It is about an internal territory where we are taken, or driven, when life goes off course, or does not go as planned. The trauma of accident or illness—physical or mental—is a wilderness. Estrangement from family and friends is a wilderness. Abuse from another is a wilderness. Grief over the loss of a loved one is a wilderness. Cancer, suicide, addiction, going broke, divorce, violence, homelessness, prison, hunger, war—and the refugees it creates—all are places of wilderness where our guides fall short, our preparations are never quite good enough, and the metaphoric 40 days—or 40 years—can be a long, long time.

Not many of us get through this life without some wilderness time. It seems the world has been made that way. Life can be both beautiful and terrible. We may do our best to avoid wilderness time, to run away from its borderlands towards more comfortable illusions of safety where we are in control and bad things happen to other people—for a reason. Our God tells us different; our God calls us to these places of uncertainty, to wilderness—not to make us suffer, but to help us realize *that* is where God lives—and has always been found. God lives in the wilderness—the wild, stark, unpredictable, stripped down, intense, unadorned, beautiful wilderness. God lives in the wilderness *with us*, walks through it with us, protects us from wild beasts, sends angels to attend us, and in due time redeems our deepest suffering.

And this is why the wilderness is the first stop on our way with Jesus to Jerusalem, and why the Church does her best to be a helpful guide through the rituals of Lent. It is in

the wilderness that we are stripped our prideful, arrogant, most selfish selves, and reborn with living water that springs from the desert. It was there that Jesus understood who he was, and what he was to do, and that his Father would be there with him, then and always. And the angels attended him. Our Father will be with us, too—when life is beautiful and when life is terrible—giving us strength and direction and the power to overcome even wild beasts when necessary. And angels will attend us as needed. Always. AMEN