

Sunday, March 10, 2019
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Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Luke 4:1-13

God Moves...into the Desert

The temptation of Jesus. We hear of how Jesus was led into the wilderness (the desert), ate nothing and then was tempted by the devil. He was asked to turn stones into bread, to worship the devil and to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. There are many things that we can learn from each of these different temptations as Jesus responds to the devil with Scripture. But this morning it is not the temptations themselves that I want to focus on. Instead I want to look at where these temptations took place, which was in the wilderness. We're told that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted.

The wilderness. Imagine what that must have been like. He's probably out in the middle of a land that is unsettled. We know he's not eating anything and there are no other people around. Jesus is by himself as he's tempted in the wilderness. We also know that the wilderness is not a place where we want to be or go. And yet, the reason we're talking about the wilderness today, is that I am sure there have been times when we all have been there—when we've felt alone out in the middle of an unsettled land, in the wilderness of life.

Some of us may have been in the literal, physical geographical wilderness, where the land is wild or barren or untamed. Some of us may consider cities to be another type of wilderness and chaos. Or our time in the wilderness may have been something different. Maybe the wilderness you've been in looked like a hospital waiting room, or the moment after a phone call changed your life forever or the time spent in a funeral home. Maybe your wilderness was the tightness in your chest as you knew something was wrong but didn't yet know what it was.

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Maybe your wilderness was the time you prayed and prayed to God and felt like there was no answer. Instead it was an empty and lonely place with temptation all around.

These places are not places we willingly go to. We don't want the wilderness. We avoid the wilderness. We want safety and comfort. In fact, many of us probably go out of our way so we don't have to go to or through the wilderness of life. There are many things we use to do that. We might seek comfort in food, or books, or just try to stay so busy we can't think about anything else. We might avoid the places or people that remind us of our wilderness. Whatever it is we do, we are doing it to stay out of the wilderness for no one wants to go there.

Yet the truth is, we never fully succeed. There will always be times when we are away from what we know, away from what's comfortable, out in the empty space with no one else around. There will be times of wilderness in our lives, just as Jesus had to spend time being tempted out in the wilderness, so will we spend time out there. In fact there are probably many who believe the church is currently spending time in the wilderness; as culture continues to change, numbers decline, and disagreement and divides rise. What is all of that if not a type of wilderness?

And most everyone thinks this is bad. The wilderness is a bad place to be, which is why we avoid it. But what if it's not as bad as we think it is? Yes, being in the wilderness is scary and painful and a lot work but what if, instead of seeing those times of wilderness in our lives as inherently bad we saw them as a time when we were wholly dependent on God.

In times of wilderness, our comforts are gone; those things we use to avoid the wilderness are gone and so the one thing we are left with is God. And we see this in the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness. Remember he's not eating, there is no one around and he's the middle of unsettled land. Yet the Spirit was with him. We are told that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit

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and that the Spirit led him into the wilderness. In the verse following this passage, we are told that Jesus returned to Galilee filled with the power of the Spirit. The Spirit was with Jesus the entire time. Even as he was being tempted, even when it seemed like he was on his own, Jesus was actually never alone. God was there with him in the wilderness the entire time.

In this then, we can be reassured that we are never alone, even when it may seem that way. God will be with us even during our times in the wilderness, when there is nothing else to lean on we can lean on God. And we can be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

We know this by reading the text, but we also learn it through the time we spend away from the comforts of the world, during time spent in the wilderness. Jesus learned things from his time in the wilderness. Barbara Brown Taylor, a pastor, author and professor explores what Jesus learned in one of her sermons and she writes,

What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to Jesus? It *freed* him--from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose, from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life, from any illusion he might have had that God would make his choices for him. After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else. (http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam)

Jesus was led into the wilderness to learn and struggle and to worship God. And the great thing is through it all he was filled with the Spirit. And Jesus learned to trust the Spirit, to trust God to such an extent that shortly before his arrest he was able to pray, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus spent time in

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the wilderness to be tempted and to learn. It was there, without the comforts of earthly things, he acknowledged dependence on God.

This trust and dependence on God are things we can learn and acknowledge. But in order to do that we have to enter the wilderness. We have to leave behind the things we've been using to avoid the difficulties and pain of the wilderness. We have to leave behind those things we use to seek comfort and begin to seek God.

This is part of the reason for the season of Lent in the church. As we are here on the first Sunday of this Lenten season, we are reminded again of how we are to seek God. Lent is a time we step away from the comforts of our world, are reminded that we are frail humans who are dependent on God. It is a season in which we are reminded and reaffirm what it means to be a follower of Christ as we wait for Easter. We are encouraged again to place our faith and trust in God.

In order to do this many people will put away or give up something that they felt was keeping them from God. They will voluntarily, during this season, enter a type of wilderness; a place in which they are intentionally seeking dependence on God. I know of people who gave up Facebook, their cell phones, a favorite snack or food, shopping, or television; whatever it was they felt they were depending on instead of depending on God.

While this is not something you have to do it reminds us again of the value of the wilderness. It is a place we can seek and find God. Sometimes we are thrust into the wilderness beyond all human comfort such as that wilderness in the hospital waiting room or at the funeral home. But there are other times when we are just avoiding the dependence on God. We'll find comfort on our own; if we just read these books, or stay busy enough, or watch those movies, we'll be fine. We'll find our way out of this pain. Yet it is when we lay it all before God, when

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we come before God baring ourselves and our pain that we can begin to find our way through the wilderness. Because God will lead us.

It doesn't mean the pain or difficulties or loneliness will go away. But it does mean that we can come out the other side just as Jesus came through his time in the wilderness; just as Easter always follows the time of Lent. We may find ourselves in the wilderness, but God will lead us through it.

And so during this time of Lent, I invite each of us to reflect on our wilderness, what is it, how do you feel, where can you find God in it. Also, we can ask ourselves what we use to stay out of the wilderness, what do we depend on instead of depending on God. And then we can work to seek God and allow God to lead us out of the wilderness; to lead us through life. Because as our psalm reading reminds us, "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'"

Whatever your wilderness, whatever you might seek during this Lenten season, may you gain the trust and knowledge to be able to live out these words, "God is my refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I place my trust."

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