

“Wilderness Blessings”

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent – March 10, 2019

Sermon Text: Luke 4:1-13 (The Temptation in the Wilderness)

Wilderness is described as an uncultivated, uninhabited, inhospitable place. One untouched by human activity. There is life there, even the promise of abundant life for what does live there. But just a visit to such a place requires a resonance with its stark rhythm. It's not a place we want to live in much of the time. Oddly, however, time in such a landscape seems to be a part of the Divine cycle for any life. And it is a place like none other where we can find out who we really are and discover the resources we need to become who we are really meant to be.

Among times we are most likely to find ourselves in the “wilderness” is in a time of transition. For a time, whether we want to or not, we need to be unsettled and tested to prepare for something new to happen in our life. Whether we see it or not, there is a promise waiting for us on the other side of such times and wilderness can help us move with greater clarity towards it. Oddly, wilderness times can bless us into life waiting for us on the other side of the difficult journey into and through them.

Such it was for the Hebrews as a people delivered out of Egypt and headed towards the Promised Land, but spending forty years and an entire generation, wandering in strange and alien territories, through wilderness and desert, to prepare them for the promise waiting for them. Such it was for Jesus, not needing to be delivered out of anything but needing to affirm, perhaps for himself, an adult identity dramatically identified at his baptism at the River Jordan. Forty days in the adjacent desert wilderness would test his understanding of just what happened to him as he came up dripping from the river, felt something powerful

come upon him, and a Divine Voice announced who was and was meant to be: “Son. Beloved. One in whom I am well pleased.”

Sometimes it takes a wilderness to really show us what we must rely upon for the life we are destined for in the Divine vision for all of life. Sometimes, wilderness has or will involve death and loss and it is within that desolate landscape we either find, trust and follow the pathway to new life or we die to what might have been. The Lent to Easter pathway that Jesus traveled is the ultimate story of the pathway along, through and beyond such wilderness times.

Wilderness is the gospel landscape we find ourselves in on this first Sunday of Lent. Jesus is there and what he finds there gives us clues as to how to live the various landscapes of our own lives.

Wilderness is not just a geographic territory we encounter in our exterior world – the world we physically inhabit. Wilderness is also one of the various territories we inhabit in our interior world, the inner landscape of heart and mind. If we travel in and through an exterior physical wilderness, it messes with our mind and heart. If we travel in and through an inner wilderness, it messes with our life in the exterior world. The exterior and interior are intricately interwoven.

I believe there is a radical and powerful message for us in today’s gospel story: that wilderness is a place of blessing. And, believe it or not, if you have been through what may be a wilderness time in your life, you have been blessed. How and why are then the critical questions - if you buy into this “good news.”

In our gospel story this morning, Jesus, immediately following his baptism, is led by the spirit into the wilderness. The “wilderness” around the River Jordan is desert: barren, dry, sun scorched desert, scrub

brush and rock, weathered hard-packed or shifting sand. What survives there must quickly adapt by focusing on and tapping into only what is absolutely essential to life. What makes the difference is external resources, but even more significantly inner ones.

Wilderness is a place where we confront ourselves in times when we find ourselves stripped, vulnerable, in a state of actual or perceived loss of what we believe made life bearable or fruitful for us before. Wilderness is a place that threatens us with a message that everything life giving has abandoned us, deserted us.

Wilderness is a place where what is hostile to human life is in the very fabric of the territory, flowing through the very air breathed in there. This is where Jesus met what is most hostile to life. Where he was confronted with what is most hostile to our true identity as loving, life giving creatures created by God to be such. It is an energy that messes with our mind, manipulates our heart, casts doubt on whatever we trust and aims to dislodge us from the ground of our being. This hostile energy the Bible and we who read it identify as “Satan.” This “Satan” knows our weak spots and targets us there. So, it was with Jesus.

Jesus must have been powerfully strengthened by his baptism and the Voice that called him “Son, beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” That is before his wilderness experience. Wow! What a “high” he must have felt as he rose up out of the river, still dripping wet, and felt the spirit of God coming upon him! Identity firmly established, no questions need to be asked. I know who I am. I know I am loved. I know that I have value and worth to my Father in heaven. I know I am on the right path.

But then, in the space of a few words, Jesus finds himself in the wilderness, weakened, suffering, physically, emotionally and mentally drained by its harshness, its cruelty to human life. And now besieged by

the most powerful negative force that roams the deserted places of our lives. What this story calls Satan.

In this desert wilderness, beset by demons, his whole identity threatened, Jesus survives the onslaught and emerges with a tensile strength and a firm-from-testing understanding of who he is and whose he is, bound to the Creator of life, not bound to the one hostile to it.

Who am I? Am I loved and protected? Do I have value and worth? Does my life have meaning and purpose in the eyes of the One that offers real life? Am I on the right track? These are the questions we are forced to confront in the wilderness times of our lives. The blessing comes as each of us finds and relies on a Presence there that affirms and strengthens us to emerge from the desert and live lives in which we hear a Divine Voice saying “You are mine! I divinely created you. Yes! And yes, and yes and yes! Yes, to each one of those questions about identity, worthiness, purpose in my eyes. Yes, to my love that is essential to the ongoing and eternal life I created you to live into.”

The desert wilderness experience strips us down to our need for the bare necessities of life. To survive we must locate and tap into what is essential for life. It’s when we are forced to choose the resources that will see us through.

It’s not an easy place, the desert wilderness times of our lives. It wasn’t for Jesus, it has not nor will be for us. Wilderness times are not optional to human life. We wish they were, but they are not. They happen. They are going to happen. We can’t hide from them; they find us. We can’t run away from them, nor escape them; they seek us out and find us. Because in some strange way they seem to be what is necessary for us to live into the universal cycle of dying to what seems to be working and being rebirthed into a way that works better for continuing life for each

of us and for those around us. We are subject to renewal, by virtue of our very human nature, and there is a force that wants to make that happen for us and for its Divine vision for all of life. And there is a conflicting, confounding force that seeks to thwart that vision.

Wilderness didn't just happen to Jesus in the physically challenging geographic desert out of sight of the Jordan River. Wilderness companioned him on the heart and mind deserting dusty roads throughout a Roman controlled Palestine. Wilderness stalked him among the crowds that sought him out wherever he went, with doubters and naysayers, and those, even of his own kind, who were threatened by him and his message. Wilderness surrounded him in the Jewish synagogues of his faith tradition, traveled with him along the streets of Jerusalem, and finally wilderness presented its final challenge on a hill called Golgatha. But Love sustained him throughout. So, it can be with us.

Through examining my own life and sitting with others who have also had questions about both the abundant and barren times of their lives I have come to understand and respect the counter intuitive nature of blessings emerging out of what feel like the sterile and life "threatening" times of our lives. Those times of apparent loss and actual despair and when "Why me, Lord" questions stalk us. I can see more clearly now that despite the very real threat of diminishment and loss of life that wilderness times present, the gift through and beyond such times is discovering, re-discovering firmer ground, sustainable faith and trust, new life, renewed strength and a clearer sense of the profound Love that will seek us out, companion us and transform despair into hope for continued life no matter where we are.

I easily forget this. So, I seem to need to drop into the memory of these death-defying times. To experience anew the exquisite relief, the beauty

and peace waiting for me when I live once again in the knowledge of the breadth and depth and height of the Great Love that pulls us though. We enter wilderness perhaps wondering if this Love is really true.

Wilderness offers us the blessing of seeking and being found by the light of Great Love. Embraced and nourished by it, we find out just how loved and valued we really are.

Lent can offer a wilderness experience for those seeking this truth and longing for the blessing of the profound Presence that waits for us anywhere we go. Sometimes we find the deepest truth in life when we are challenged by a need to know what is truly essential for life. It's a radical journey. But Christ leads the way, if we care to follow. Seek and you shall find. This is the good news. Knock and the door to love and life will be opened to you. May you seek, then find such exquisite grace and the peace it brings to life.