Paying Attention in the Wilderness

When I was a kid, I thought Lent was mostly about loss.

It was the season when people gave things up. Chocolate. Soda. TV. Curse words. Whatever it was, it always sounded like a long stretch of saying no to things you liked. Lent felt like a spiritual diet—forty days of restriction, a kind of gloomy countdown to Easter.

I don't remember anyone using the word wilderness, but that's what it felt like in my imagination: a long, dry place where you just had to hang on until something better came along.

But over time, my understanding has shifted.

Now, when I hear the stories about Jesus in the wilderness, or the people of Israel wandering through the desert, I'm not so sure those stories are mainly about loss. And I'm not so sure Lent is either.

Lately, I find myself wondering if the wilderness is less about deprivation and more about attention.

In the wilderness, there isn't much to distract you. There aren't as many comforts or familiar routines. You can't rely on the usual systems. And because of that, you start to notice things you might have missed before—small gifts, daily provisions, the presence of others on the journey, even the quiet voice of God.

And now I'm wondering if that has something to say about stewardship, too.

In our work with congregations, we often talk about alignment—about how our time, energy, and resources reflect what we truly care about. But alignment doesn't usually happen in the middle of constant busyness. It happens when we pause long enough to notice.

Many of our churches are in seasons that feel a bit like wilderness. Attendance patterns shift. Budgets tighten. Leadership changes. The future doesn't always look the way it once did.

And it would be easy to treat those seasons as pure loss. Easy to assume the goal is simply to get back to the way things were.

But what if the wilderness is also a place of discovery?

What if it's where we start to see what really matters?
What if it's where we notice the gifts we still have?
What if it's where we learn to trust again—not in abundance, but in enough?

In the biblical wilderness, the people didn't receive storehouses of food. They received manna—just enough for the day. And maybe that daily rhythm of receiving and sharing is closer to the heart of stewardship than any campaign or budget spreadsheet.

So this Lent, I'm less interested in what I'm giving up, and more interested in what I might finally notice.

Where is there enough?
Where is there generosity already at work?
Where might God be inviting us to trust, to share, or to begin again?

Maybe the wilderness isn't just a place of loss.
Maybe it's a place where we learn to pay attention.

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