

February 21, 2021
The First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

I remember the day like it was yesterday. It's hard to forget the day you are shoved into the wilderness, unprepared, and afraid. I had gotten a call from my former husband. His voice was shaky. He had been hospitalized after having a grand mal seizure. His brain cancer had returned.

We had dealt with cancer for a long time. Our years together had been divided into segments. 3 months between MRIs. 6 months between MRIs. 12 months between MRIs. Cancer had been a part of our entire marriage but the cancer had always been held at bay. Life was good. We had two beautiful sons and our home was filled with joy. Year after year, the doctors would say everything was stable.

But, one year, things started to shift. A little at a time, day after day. He began to change. I would notice things that didn't add up. It was hard for him to focus. He would repeat stories and avoid certain topics that he didn't know the answers to. His behavior was often unpredictable and then he stopped getting out of bed. We went to various doctors. The MRIs came back clean so it must be depression they said. They suggested different types of pills and therapy. But, he refused treatment.

Things continued to get worse and we eventually separated. I felt helpless and afraid, unsure of how to navigate a situation that was so incredibly unstable. I thought that if we separated he might finally get the help he needed.

He didn't. He only got worse. And then a year into our separation, it happened. The seizure. And suddenly everything made sense. My world collapsed as I finally understood. I understood the cause of everything we had faced and everything that had torn us apart. I felt defeated. Our marriage over, his health spiraling, our boys terrified for what might happen to their father. We were all forced into a wilderness that we never asked for.

That's the thing about the wilderness...who ever desires to go there? Whoever wants to face uncertainty and pain? Yet, we will all face wilderness moments in our lives at one time or another. They will undoubtedly be unexpected and they will surely be difficult. But, as I have learned, and the reason I am sharing this story with you this morning, is if we are open to the possibility, our wilderness can also be a source of blessing.

Over the years I have found so much comfort in the story of Jesus' own journey into the wilderness and the blessing he received from it. I especially love the version we are provided in the Gospel of Mark. So, let's spend some time this morning uncovering what we might learn from Jesus' own wilderness.

Let me start with why I like the version from Mark. In Mark, we are told that Jesus is *driven* into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke describe him as *being led* into the wilderness. Now, I don't know about you but rarely, if ever, would I *choose* to be led into any kind of difficulty. Being led provides the connotation that Jesus was a willing participant, ready to go and face whatever adversity or test that was ahead. It would be like someone asking you...hey, would you like to go through a divorce? Or, would you be OK with dealing with a serious illness? Or, would you be willing to take a few months to grieve the loss of loved one? I feel pretty certain in saying that none of us would jump on that kind of opportunity.

Yet, these are the kinds of things that are forced upon us, out of the blue. We are *driven* into dealing with difficulty. For me, that makes Mark's version of Jesus' wilderness much more relatable. I imagine Jesus really being afraid to go into the desert. I imagine him struggling and hurting. I know what that feels like. I'm sure you do as well. And frankly, it's powerful to know that Jesus understands that kind of unexpected and unwelcome adversity.

We are also told in Mark that Jesus was *with* wild beasts, a fact we aren't told in the other Gospels. There is a sense that Jesus, somehow, some way, has to figure out how to live alongside the beasts that he encounters. He can't run from them or ignore them. He has to be *with* them. I find this really intriguing because it suggests that once we are in the wilderness and once we are confronted by the wild things that live there, we must work with them to survive. There is no denial or avoidance that will offer any sort of release. It is only in being with the pain that we learn to move through it.

Finally, we are told that the angels waited on Jesus. Within his wilderness, he was loved and cared for. It is a powerful reminder that God's love never leaves us and that God's mercy will always be with us. That's the belovedness Jesus felt in the midst of wild beasts. That's the belovedness we are promised when we are forced to confront our own beasts. And that is where our wilderness becomes holy. Holiness even in the midst of darkness. Holiness even in the midst of fear. Holiness even in the midst of pain.

I read a beautiful question about this kind of holiness...it is this...*How will we see the angels if we don't go into the wilderness?*

So, what angels did I find in my own wilderness? First let me say that we are all doing well these days. The cancer is still there but life shines through. My boys have gotten many more years with their dad, years we didn't expect. Yes, we both have moved on in our personal lives but after so many years of anger and pain and uncertainty...joy has returned for us both...in different homes this time around but it is a profound joy that we can now reflect upon with gratitude.

We have learned more about forgiveness and mercy and healing than I ever thought possible. We have gained an overwhelming appreciation for each day we are given. And we have come to understand that blessings can be found in the most unlikely of circumstances if we are open to allowing our angels to carry us through.

Blessing that Meets You in the Wilderness

After the
desert stillness.

After the
wrestling.

After the
hours
and days
and weeks
of emptying.

After the
hungering
and the
thirsting.

After the
opening
and seeing
and knowing.

Let this blessing be
the first sweetness
that touches
your lips,
the bread
that falls into
your arms,
the cup
that welcoming hands
press into
yours.

Let this blessing be
the road that
returns you.

Let it be
the strength to carry
the wilderness
home.

—Jan Richardson