

**The Wilderness**  
**Genesis 9:8-17 & Mark 1:9-15, Lent 1, Year B**  
**1 March 2009**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

1884 was an inauspicious year for Teddy Roosevelt. In the preceding years, Roosevelt had experienced a string of remarkable and fulfilling successes. He'd graduated from Harvard Phi Beta Kappa; in his early twenties he'd published works on such varied topics as ornithology and the Naval War of 1812; he'd married the prettiest girl in New York, who turned out to be as loving as she was lovely; and he was elected to the New York State Assembly. Roosevelt was truly in the Promised Land.

And then on February 14, 1884—Valentine's Day—Roosevelt's mother and his beloved wife died within hours of one another in the same house. His wife had given birth to their only child just two days earlier. In his diary on that day, the usually effusive Roosevelt scrawled a large "X" on the page with the lone sentence, "The light has gone out of my life."

Later that same year, Roosevelt attempted to channel his grief into political activity. He—the most political of men—staked his future on the losing candidate at the Republican National Convention, and after it ended he was as devastated in his public life as in his private.

Not knowing what to do, Roosevelt felt himself driven from the world he'd known and into the desolate Dakota Badlands, moving physically into a wilderness which mirrored the utter and barren wilderness he felt inside.<sup>1</sup>

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Our readings today tell us two stories of the wilderness, and in their difference they expand our understanding of what wilderness entails. In the Gospel, we read about a wilderness characterized by its desolation. It is stark, dry, and without sustenance. It leaves the one trapped within it susceptible to the temptation of devils who would offer false promises of comfort and ease. This definition of wilderness is both terrible and familiar. We have experienced it inside ourselves. We can in our lives recall its thirst and the temptation to attempt its escape by embracing demons.

In the Genesis lesson, we read about a different kind of wilderness, this one characterized not by stark scarcity but by a drowning abundance. Noah and his ark emerge from a deluge, an incessant, pounding rain that threatens to overwhelm them. The storm swirls and beats with such relentless power that keeping equilibrium is virtually impossible. We know what this is like, too,

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<sup>1</sup> For a riveting account of Roosevelt's remarkable life, see Edmund Morris' *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*.

and it, too, is wilderness: When the world comes at us so fast we swirl and spin, when clouds gather and we are pounded on all sides.

In both cases we read today the time in the wilderness lasts forty days. In the Bible's language, that's another way of saying, "longer than we can scarcely endure." It also happens to be the same duration as the season of Lent.

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Teddy Roosevelt's life experience was lived out in the public eye. He was a larger-than-life figure after all. But his experience resonates with ours. Roosevelt's time in the wilderness began just when his life had begun to seem golden, just when he'd seemed to have found his Promised Land. N.T. Wright says this should come as no surprise. "You are never far from the wilderness when you're in the Promised Land," he counsels, "When you're in Jerusalem, the wilderness is just over the next hill."<sup>2</sup>

We know that to be true. Our wildernesses often come hot on the heels of promise. Sometimes these are of our own making. Whatever success or fulfillment we enjoy in life becomes heady, and we act imprudently or even recklessly, falling from grace so quickly we nearly get whiplash. Other times we're driven into the wilderness for no discernible reason and with no discernible cause at all. Life's water dries up, and we find ourselves in the desert. Or, life comes at us in a deluge, and we discover we are drowning. Either way, the wilderness is terrifying. It feels devoid of grace, and we avoid it at all costs.

All this is true, and it is why we have such trouble making any sense of the season of Lent. It's why we resolve to give up chocolate (or, in my case, beer) and feel satisfied that therefore we are observing a holy Lent. But Lent, you see, is so much more than that. The forty days of Lent, like the forty days of the flood or Jesus' forty days of temptation in the desert, are about *facing the threatening wilderness* with eyes wide open.

Why in the world would we do such a thing? If we're already in the wilderness, why would we choose to remain? And especially if we've *escaped* wildernesses in our lives, why would we willingly return to them? Why would we re-approach our darkest moments?

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There is a story about the Cherokee rite of passage to manhood, when an adolescent discovers his true identity.<sup>3</sup> As the daytime light fails, the boy's father takes him deep into the

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. XX, no. 2, pg. 40.

<sup>3</sup> This story was serendipitously sent to me last week by parishioner Ginny Craig.

forest wilderness, blindfolds him and leaves him alone. The boy must sit on a stump all night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shine through it.

The boy is naturally terrified. He can hear all kinds of noises in the night. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. Someone may reach out of the darkness and do him harm. Wind blows and the air chills, and the young man must remain in the wilderness.

Finally, after a fearful night, the sun appears and the young man removes his blindfold. It is only then that he discovers his father sitting on the stump next to him. The father has been at watch, tending his son through the dark night. For the young man, discovering his identity required facing the long night in the wilderness—the two were bound together—but even the darkness he was not alone.

When Noah and his little ark emerge from the storm, God speaks to them (*all* of them, by the way—every creature under heaven). God doesn't say there will be no more storms. He doesn't say the clouds are gone for good. What God does say to Noah and his menagerie is that *he has been present with them even in the downpour*. Flood and wave will no longer have the power to destroy, God promises, because we will never face them without him. The rainbow is God's covenant that light will *always* emerge from darkness. And *there* Noah discovers that he has the faith to navigate uncharted and lonely waters.

And in the Gospel, we mustn't lose sight that it is *after* Jesus baptism—*after* God opens the heavens and declares Jesus' favor—that the desert opens before him and the devil crowds in. Even Jesus isn't spared temptation or the wilderness. But even so, Mark almost tumbles over himself to tell us that *more* than the devil and *more* than wild beasts, God's *very angels* meet Jesus in the wilderness. And *there* Jesus discovers what it is to live as the Son of God.

When Teddy Roosevelt went to the Badlands, he thought his life was over. And once there, he faced scorching sun, outlaws, and the greatest blizzard the American West has ever seen. But somehow, not in avoidance of that wilderness but rather *through it*, Roosevelt emerged three years later a truer man. He entered the physical and emotional wilderness convinced that light was gone from his life, but there he found new light in the darkness. Instead of remaining merely a gifted and ambitious climber, he discovered the person we remember for his courage, his conviction, and his love for people and the environment in need.

And so we see, there is a flip-side to N.T. Wright's point. It is surely true that the wilderness threatens us, perhaps most especially when we have been to the Promised Land. But it is also true that even the wilderness need not frighten the children of God. *There is no storm so dark, no wasteland so desolate, no forty days so long, that it is beyond the reach of the God of*

*love.* No matter how hard against us the rain falls, no matter if its sheets are so dense as to seem like a solid wall, God is there. No matter how dry the desert, no matter what devils nip at our heels or infect our hearts, God's angels are nearby. It may even be in the wilderness that we learn new things about ourselves and about God. It is in our wildernesses where we discover who we are, we meet God, and we learn what God—and not our own inclinations—would have us do with our lives.

With the sure knowledge that God's light will guide us and God's angels will tend our hunger and thirst, this Lent we can face the demons, the desert, or the storm. If we've fled our wilderness before, not truly facing it but simply suppressing it a hair's breadth beneath the surface of our lives, then this Lent may be the time, with prayer and with God, to go back, as Jesus himself does throughout his ministry, to face the wild and desolate places inside. Like Jesus, we don't travel alone. There are angels with us, guiding our steps and tending us in the night.

*Amen.*