



THE WILDERNESS... SHAPES OUR IDENTITY AND CALL

PSALM 32:1-10, MATTHEW 4:1-11

PASTOR ROBYN HOGUE

1
MAR

We've all had our wilderness moments. We've all had our wilderness times when the landscape looked unfamiliar and the resources were unfamiliar to us. We've been in desolate circumstances.

I know there are people in our church who know the wilderness of job failure. Either they were asked to leave or the job they held was taken away. There are people in our church who know that wilderness. There are people in our church who know the wilderness of a lost love and the empty relational landscape stripped of its shelter because of abuse or neglect, infidelity, divorce and death. There are people in our church who know the wilderness of immigration and will forever remember the bewildering vastness of a new country, a new culture, new tastes and sounds and sights that told them in a thousand ways every day that this new land was not yet their home. I know there are people in our church who have been to war and have lived through the perilousness of horrors unknown to those they pledged to protect. There are people in our church who know the wilderness where safe shelter for the night is hard to find let alone a new home. There are people in our church who know the wilderness space of their bodies being given a label for a disease which has no easy treatment. There are people in our church who know the desolate tract of addiction. Being in the wilderness can be an experience of powerlessness. And I know that you know this.

We've all had our wilderness moments. We've all had our wilderness times when the landscape looked unfamiliar and the resources were unfamiliar to us. We've been in desolate circumstances.

But if we back up, if we turn around, and take a look at the end of Matthew chapter 3 (just before our story today which begins in Matthew chapter 4)—we might be able to enter this week's Scripture text with the same knowledge that Jesus had: that when He went into the wilderness, He went with the baptismal waters of the Jordan still clinging to Him, and with the name *Beloved* ringing in His ears.

How else to enter into the forty-day place that lay ahead of Him? How else to cross into the wilderness where He would have no food, no community, nothing that was familiar to Him—and, to top it off, would have to wrestle with the devil? How else, but to go into that landscape with the knowledge of His own name: *Beloved*.

I imagine many of us picture Jesus on the cusp of His public ministry, feeling empowered from His baptism and God's affirming word, following the Spirit, hopeful, confident of divine purpose and eager to get to work. We imagine Jesus, without hesitation, bounding after the Spirit...into the wilderness.

But if we'd been there, we'd most likely pause and look around, note the inhospitable surroundings and think, "Huh, this wasn't what I expected!" Perhaps we'd say to ourselves, "Wait a minute. The Spirit surely knows the best way to go, so... no worries." At this point, our awareness of this next part of the plot would be limited. Maybe, we'd think the wilderness trek was merely the shortest way to the town where things would really get started. Then we pay attention to the next verb in the sentence: tempted.

Next thing we know, the devil shows up. We can almost hear the sinister music coming to a crescendo as the tempter makes that first pitch to derail Jesus from His holy vocation.

Every first Sunday of Lent we get reminded of the perils of our baptismal calling. The Spirit descends, God speaks and then almost before we've even dried off, the devil makes a counteroffer: Don't you want to be affirmed? Don't you finally want the special treatment you've deserved for so long? Doesn't a guarantee of no pain and suffering sound good to you? Beloved child of God is good, but isn't what the devil offers that much better? "Not tempted," you say? How about for your congregation? Don't you want that shortcut to resources and influence for them? Don't you want your faith affirmed by the masses and your church given the respect it is due? Wouldn't church growth without pain and without suffering the necessary change sound good to you?

I once was complaining about something in church ministry to a mentor who said to expect pushback from unexpected quarters when you start down a path you believe to be of God's leading. Doing the work of the Lord attracts the attention of the devil, he said.

Jesus, we know, does not give into temptation. He fires back Scripture to the evil one, He is well-versed in the word of God. Even famished, after forty days of fasting, Jesus turns His back on the tempter's wares. "We do not live by bread alone, but by the word that comes from the mouth of God." It sounds so lovely... and yet a little far-fetched in the face of Jesus' physical needs and the world's true hunger. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Sound advice, to be sure... but how often are we consciously testing God? Aren't we typically oblivious to the ways we test God through our daily inability to trust God's provisions and promises? "Worship the Lord your God and serve only God." Yes, of course, of course. We know this basic, primary rule of faith. Idolatry is out. Loyalty to God and God alone is the goal. And yet... how well does our life reflect this first commandment?

Jesus gets it right and we are not surprised. We read in Hebrews 4:15 that in Jesus we "do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet, was without sin." That last part of the sentence is surely significant, setting Jesus apart in a way to which we can't relate. And yet, we take comfort in knowing Jesus experienced hunger and pain, loss and grief and even the urge to do and be less than who He really was. His ability to withstand temptation doesn't negate His experience of standing face to face with evil and all its seemingly glorious offerings.

So perhaps, as we enter into this season that calls for honest assessment of ourselves and our discipleship, we would do well to linger in the wilderness a while with Jesus, watching as He responds to the devil, affirming that God's Word is meant for good, refusing to capitulate to lesser loyalties and

enduring real hunger, true deprivation, authentic temptation. Lingering in the wilderness might allow us to hold nothing back from our confession and lament.

This wilderness-before-the-ministry scene shows us that Jesus will stand with us during our biggest mistakes, our greatest losses, our gravest fears, and our most devastating disappointments. After all, He endured the devil and prevailed. Jesus knows our pain and empathizes with our weakness. He will face the ugliness of our lives with us.

The wilderness of Lent will be not only as a time of confession and repentance, but also bring an invitation to lay bare to our Lord all that we most want to hide from God, from ourselves and others. We need to know Jesus can handle our shame and guilt, our pettiness and anxieties, our dashed dreams and our secret fears. We need to know Jesus is with us, utterly, completely and unequivocally in the most terrifying wildernesses of our lives. We need to know that when we give in to temptation, Jesus will, in fact, deliver us from the evil He survived and defeated.

No less than Jesus Himself will remain with us throughout these 40 days, praying for us, tending to us, standing with us when we stand up to evil and forgiving us when we succumb to the devil's temptations.

I OFFERED THIS BLESSING AT THE CLOSE OF THE SERVICE:

In this first week of Lent as we remember all those times we have been in the wilderness where the resources looked few, as we remember what tempted us and what sustained us, we will do well to have our true name echoing in our ears. We will do well to claim our true identity that we, too, are the beloved of God. And so, I want to offer you a blessing as we close our service today. It is a poem I discovered this week by poet, Jan Richardson. It's called **Beloved Is Where We Begin**

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart
do not despair
that is what this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.
I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.