

LONGING AND WILLINGNESS IN THE WILDERNESS

Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

What do you imagine when you hear the word “wilderness”? It probably depends on the context, to a certain degree. We often turn to thoughts of the wild, natural world; uncultivated and as untouched by humans as possible. Or in this Lenten season, we may imagine Jesus, alone for 40 days in the wilderness, wandering through a dry, infertile desert. In these instances, the wilderness may seem like a scary or uncomfortable place because there is a sense of things being untamed and encountering some sort of struggle—a struggle to survive, a struggle to live within the confines of your own thoughts, a struggle to see past what is immediately in front of you.

While last Sunday we heard about Jesus being in that desert wilderness, this week we greet Jesus in a totally different physical place: he is in the streets, meeting and connecting and engaging with all sorts of people. It is a wilderness of a different kind. One where, instead of being alone in the desert, Jesus is among humanity, with all its flaws, dealing with the very real and very messy aspects of human living.

We may be more likely to recognize this kind of a wilderness than one where we are alone in nature. The wilderness we live in on a daily basis is out there on our streets and in our online world. It is in war and protests and sanctions. It is in mass graves and unclean drinking water. It is in arguments over whether to keep wearing masks or move away from them. It is in the way that people are inequitably treated through systems and policies and biases and discrimination.

The wilderness Jesus engaged in on the streets involved different issues and cultural norms and understandings than we engage with today, but it was still a wilderness, and it was still a key part of his ministry. For Jesus, the wilderness of humanity was not something to try and control, but to move through with a purpose and a plan: to bring healing, compassion, and restoration to all who would embrace it.

Our scripture opens with some Pharisees approaching Jesus and warning him to get away, to cease doing what he is doing, to move somewhere other than toward Jerusalem. Their reasoning on the surface sounds considerate: “Herod wants to kill you.” But it was likely a far more complex situation; one that involved politics of the day and the benefit to the Pharisees of not having this healer hanging around their streets,

their neighbourhoods, their temple, and undermining their own Pharisaic roles. Whatever their motive, the Pharisees' warning asks Jesus to stop. The Pharisees clearly didn't know who they were dealing with, though. I mean, Jesus had already been in the desert wilderness on his own, fasting, for forty days; he'd had time to reflect on his situation, on who he was, on what he represented, on what is just, on how to live compassionately, on how to best share faith and express love: he was turned fully toward God and the manifestation of God's kingdom on earth. Whatever these Pharisees had to say, Jesus was already many steps ahead of them. What is threat of death from Herod when there is saving work to be done? More than that, what is threat of death from Herod when there is a cross on the horizon? When there is a "third day" on which to truly finish his work?

The Pharisees—caught up in their political and religious agendas—are unwilling to see where following Jesus to Jerusalem would truly lead. And Jesus recognizes their blatant unwillingness through their collusion with Herod. The Pharisees arrived on the scene trying to tell Jesus where to go, but Jesus reverses the situation and tells them where to go, specifically, back to Herod, "that fox." Now, "fox" may not seem like such a bad name to be called these days, but back then to be called a fox was not viewed as a good thing: foxes were seen as clever, but sly and unprincipled. Jesus' harsh words for Herod reflect his utmost confidence in the will of God and in the task that he, the Son of God, had been called to complete.

Jesus also recalls and predicts murderous actions in Jerusalem, but he doesn't let Herod, nor Jerusalem, lead him into a revolutionary diatribe, calling his followers to take action against Jerusalem or its leaders. Instead he veers into a motherly lament: "How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Even in his frustration, Jesus ultimately longs to care for all of Jerusalem and looks upon the city and its people with tender compassion and care. Jesus wants to gather these lost and desperate masses together, just like mother hen gathering her chicks. And yet, God's people are unwilling. Unwilling to be gathered, unwilling even to see. To see the Word made flesh walking among them.

Unwillingness is part of this messy wilderness we live in. Humans can be quite unwilling, especially in our response to God. As God moves to love us, to grow in relationship with us, we push away and insist we have control, turning away and showing our unwillingness to be loved by our Creator. In our scripture today, we hear of how some people are unwilling to see God present before them. They are unwilling to see God healing and restoring in their midst. And this unwillingness will eventually lead them to nail Jesus to the cross.

Of course, unwillingness comes in a variety of ways. Perhaps it is unwillingness to set aside some form of distraction. Or maybe an unwillingness to let go of anger, or to seek or grant forgiveness. Perhaps it is an unwillingness to let go of hatred, especially toward your enemies. Maybe it's an unwillingness to be comforted or consoled, to be vulnerable to a community. Perhaps it is unwillingness to see possibilities and hope for the future, but instead only see, with fear, a future of loss and destruction.

The part of Paul's letter to the Philippians that we heard today emphasizes the way that Paul wants the church to focus on being a community. Upon first reading the passage it seems odd that Paul would say "join in imitating me"—isn't that an indication that he thinks he's so much like Jesus that he believes everyone should do as he does? In other words, shouldn't his lack of humility be alarming to the church community? But this is not the case. Rather, Paul invites them all to imitate him and to observe one another not as an example of individual perfection, but as an example of vulnerability. He knows there are struggles within the community, and he knows that a willingness to observe those struggles and engage in the messy wilderness of those struggles as a community is far more powerful a tool than trying to individually work toward an impossible goal of perfection.

The community is never a perfect community. It struggles to understand how faith is lived in the world and in its particular context. Paul holds up that struggle as the way of right living. Paul longs for us to engage faith in the messiness of life not just individually, but as a community; to look toward those in your own community—your neighbour, your friend, maybe even someone you don't particularly like—and learn from the way in which they struggle to live faith in community.

Similarly, Jesus knows how in the messiness of life there is unwillingness to respond to God. And he laments this. Jesus knows where this unwillingness will lead people. He knows that, in a short time, they will line the streets and wave palm branches and shout out "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" because they want a king, a conqueror to swoop in and take out the Romans. But those same people's shouts of blessing will soon turn to shouts of "crucify him!" And even with the knowledge that this unwillingness will lead to the torture and execution of God like a criminal, Jesus longs to gather us in, to gather all people in as mother hen gathers in her chicks. Jesus longs to protect us from harm, to protect us from ourselves.

When we come at this world with the assumption that we do not need God, that we can control things, that we don't need to show vulnerability, that the struggles of the

community are irrelevant to our individual path forward, or that we can build our own protections all around us, then we have ostensibly closed our eyes and stated our unwillingness to build a relationship with God. Perhaps we want to be our own god. Or perhaps we just can't fathom how, in this world with so much suffering, we could possibly trust that God can effectively protect us.

The problem is that in this everyday wilderness we have grown to view "protection" as a very particular thing. Protection involves barriers—anything from sunscreen or medical masks to tall fences. Protection means good arbitrators or military might. Protection means strong defences and top-of-the-line air bags and social funding and high-yielding investments. In many ways, these are all good tools to help protect us in some form or another. But when Jesus offers to take us under his wing, he is not directing us toward the purchase of a really great home alarm system or even laying out a map for how to avoid potential dangers and risks as we journey through life. The protection that Jesus refers to is that of our creating, loving God.

If we are willing to come under the wings of God, to trust in God, then we will discover that the protection Jesus longs for us to have is salvation, is wholeness. Though we may believe that we are our own best defence, *this* protection offers healing, compassion, forgiveness, liberation. And the truth is, sometimes in order to experience the ministry of Jesus we have to be willing to feel uncomfortable or challenged. Our own longings have to be stretched to include our vulnerabilities. When we reflect on what is happening in our world and even in our own small corners, there is much we want to do or change, there is much we want to control or manipulate. We could choose to respond with murderous anger, like Herod. We could choose to respond with rejection, like Jerusalem. Or, we could choose to respond as Jesus did, able to find compassion for our enemies, even those who want to put us to death.

I get it, that's a hard thing to do when there's a war happening in Ukraine as we speak. And protecting the people of Ukraine, and the Russian people out protesting the war, and the people from bordering countries as they help Ukrainians escape, that feels like an almost impossible task, especially from where we sit here in Canada. But in this world of religious and political violence, what does it mean to long for our enemies to experience Jesus' compassion even as we ourselves have? To long for them to turn away from their desire for power and control and instead seek the comfort and protection and salvation of a God who loves to the end?

Today, in the quietness of Lent, in the middle of this bustling human wilderness, God is gathering. God is gathering us into Christ. Gathering us to be protected from the power

of sin and death, the power of our own unwillingness, quietly covering us with God's love. Quietly working in the world to bring life from death, reminding us what is truly important, despite our unwillingness.

May your longings reflect the struggles and needs of the communities you are a part of, and of this world. May you be willing to see hope even through the struggles, to be vulnerable even when it is uncomfortable, to let go of anger and offer forgiveness even when it is difficult. May you be open to God's gathering arms. Amen.