

Sermon- Lent I, Year B - Wilderness
2/18/24

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Several years ago, my first work in professional ministry was at a hospice home in the Milwaukee area. There are many things I remember about this time, as you can imagine, but there was a certain moment on a certain day that I always remember during the season of Lent. One morning, I met a resident to pray together before she was scheduled for surgery. I asked how she was doing or how she was holding up or something ridiculous like that, and she responded: “I am in the wilderness.” *I am in the wilderness.*

The interesting thing is that while each one of us might picture something different when we think about a wilderness - a desert, a frozen tundra, an untamed forest - we all have a sense of what “wilderness” feels like. The wilderness is unknowable. There are things about it that we cannot master or subdue. The wilderness is more powerful than we are, and our humanity - its goodness and its serious need - is suddenly and wildly exposed. The wilderness is landscape without profit. There is nothing to buy or sell or steal. There is nothing to hide us from God, and yet nothing to stop us from trying anyway. It is also an equalizer. You may be stronger or weaker or a little more prepared than someone else, but eventually, in the wilderness, we are all equally vulnerable before God.

A hospice is a sort of wilderness. Trauma is a sort of wilderness. A hospital waiting room. Depression. Addiction. Discernment. Pregnancy. Prayer. Pandemic. Creating something. Loving someone. It’s as if this life of ours as human beings together on earth is a series of wildernesses, one after the other like smudged out maps stitched together, direction and destination unknown. We may be stronger or weaker or at times more prepared, but eventually, there we are: equally vulnerable before God.

But there is good news about the wilderness. *God is there.* In the desert. In the tundra, the forest. In the place of powerlessness and desolation, we find that there is not only uncertainty and dread, but also the urgency of a wild and rich desire. In the wilderness, it becomes clear that the thousands of years of unbridled human need - our lifetimes upon lifetimes of stretching our hands toward the edges of something better and more true - every prayer our ancestors or our children have prayed for deliverance, all of this longing - all of it - is *answered by someone.*

Jesus meets us there. The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus, who contends with the devil and overcomes temptation in the desert. Jesus, whose birth itself was out near the forgotten places, whose holy family traveled across the wilds that his ancestors once crossed in their journey to freedom. In Jesus, our time in the wilderness becomes not merely a time of wandering, but a pilgrimage.

This Lenten season that we enter into is indeed a pilgrimage. We are not wandering aimlessly in the wilderness with no purpose or direction. We enter the desert with Jesus for forty days, resisting temptations of our own, keeping watch for the ministry of attending angels. We clear away that which has come between us and the love of Christ. It is not a time of hopeless wallowing, but rather a season of freshness and clarity, a season in which we remember that we are meant to one day behold our savior face to face. In these forty days, we are invited to listen for the One who answers back. The one who searches us out, lifts us up, and answers the prayers we whisper into the desert.

It is this answer that we cling to in this season. Lent is its own sort of wilderness where we journey with the Lord in the desert and the tundra. We wait for news about wars. We are wandering, as a planet, in a time of uncertainty. Waiting, wandering, longing.

And yet we see in scripture that alongside the trials of the desert, there is the ministry of angels. Our longing will be fulfilled and is now being fulfilled. This is a time to clear the brush from the path. Clear away any doubt that the savior of the world does not remember your name. Quieten your heart and look into the places of great silence. Know yourself to be not a wanderer, but a pilgrim toward that holy day when “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.”

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.