

Sermon by Rev. Jim Goos February 21, 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness for 40 days, where He was tempted by Satan.

There are about 200 references to the wilderness or the desert in the Bible. The most common reference is to the people of Israel spending 40 years wandering in the wilderness in between leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land.

There the wilderness is described as a harsh place. There is no reliable source of food or water. God provided manna each day for the people to eat. He led them to pools or springs of water, and on at least 2 occasions, told Moses to strike a rock and water would flow from the rock.

Another reference is Exodus 3. Moses was tending the sheep and goats of his father-in-law. He crossed the desert to get to Horeb, God's mountain. There he saw the burning bush and heard God speak to him out of the bush, calling him to lead God's people out of Egypt.

A third reference is 1 Samuel 23. David lived out in the wilderness for several years to stay away from King Saul, who was jealous of David's success and popularity. Saul wanted to kill David.

A fourth reference is 1 Kings 19. You know the story of Elijah and the 400 prophets of Baal. They had a contest to see which god was supreme. The prophets of Baal prepared a sacrifice to Baal, and then called on Baal to light the fire; nothing happened.

Then Elijah prepared a sacrifice to God, then had it flooded with water. Then he called on God to light the sacrifice. God not only

burnt the sacrifice, but also all the water that had collected around it!

Elijah then ordered the people to put all 400 prophets of Baal to death. King Ahab's wife, Jezebel worshiped Baal. She responded to all of this by saying that she would have Elijah put to death within 24 hours.

Elijah feared for his life and ran out into the desert. He traveled for 24 hours straight, then collapsed under a juniper tree.

An angel came to him and provided food and water. The angel told him to eat and drink, then travel to Mt. Horeb, God's mountain. Elijah did, and God spoke to him on Mt. Horeb. God did not speak out of the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but out of the silence, as a gentle whisper.

There are 2 references to the wilderness in the New Testament. One is today's Gospel: Jesus being tempted there. The other is that of John the Baptist preaching there.

To summarize all of these references: the wilderness is a harsh, unforgiving place. There is no reliable source of food or water. If you do not know how to survive in the wilderness, you could easily die there.

At the same time, the wilderness can be a place of refuge. Because it is harsh and unpopulated, it can be a place to hide, or it can be a place to be alone with God. In a few of the references above, individuals were aware of God's presence, and were able to hear him speak in the quiet of the wilderness.

The wilderness reminds us of how dependent we are on God to provide what we need to survive.

In our society, where material goods are readily available, it is easy to forget how dependent we are upon God.

The season of Lent is a kind of wilderness. We talk about fasting, spending more time in prayer, focusing on our sin and our need for forgiveness, and on Jesus' sacrifice to pay the price of our sin.

One thing I didn't mention in my references to the wilderness is fasting. In our Gospel, Jesus fasted during His 40 days in the wilderness. Elijah fasted for 40 days as he traveled across the desert to Mt. Sinai, where God spoke to him. John the Baptist's food was locusts and wild honey. That is a kind of fast.

We have several kinds of fasts during Lent. In our Worship we have a visual fast. We do not have flowers anywhere, so there is less colour. We also have a musical fast. We do not sing Alleluia; many of our hymns are more sombre, some people call them funeral dirges!

We avoid celebrations, such as weddings and baptisms during Lent. That is another kind of fast.

And we have the real meaning of fasting, avoiding food. That can include avoiding a particular food, such as chocolate, or desserts for the whole season of Lent. Or we can fast one day each week, have only water for the whole day, or skip a meal one day a week for the whole season of Lent.

On Easter Sunday, we end all of those, and we feast. We have an abundance of flowers; our church is filled with the smell and sight of Easter lilies; we have songs filled with Alleluias! The music is joyous and uplifting. And no one I know fasts on that day! Families get together to celebrate the day.

This season of Covid-19 has been a kind of wilderness. We have been forced into a kind of fast that we didn't choose: social isolation. The periods of lockdown have increased our isolation. Rose and I miss being able to regularly visit our children and grandchildren. They are 8 and under, and don't really understand why we can't visit more often, and why we can't hug them.

During this season of Lent, and of Covid, I encourage you to give some thought to finding a wilderness place, a place of refuge, a place that is isolated and quiet, a place where you realize that you are totally dependent on God.

Those of you who are seniors like I am, may not have much difficulty finding a quiet place. However, if you are like our 2 children, and have 3 or 4 young children, who have been home for a good part of the last year, while one or both parents are trying to work from home some, or all of that time, finding a quiet spot can be a challenge.

Look for a time and place that is free of distractions, where you can focus your attention on God, in prayer, in reading His Word, and simply sitting quietly in His presence, open to hearing anything He may want to say to you.

I will highlight Elijah's time on Mount Horeb. God did not speak out of the wind or the earthquake; He spoke out of the stillness, with a gentle whisper. It is extremely difficult to hear God speak to us in the midst of our busyness, or in the midst of distractions like TV, smartphones, computers and all our other devices (or voices and thoughts) demanding our attention. God's gentle whisper is easily drowned out.

It may also be that we don't have to go looking for a wilderness place. In the midst of Covid-19, we may already be in a wilderness, an unpleasant experience.

The wilderness that the people of Israel experienced was not a quiet refuge away from worldly distractions, where they could simply sit and focus on God. It was, for the most part, unpleasant and at times frightening. They were afraid of dying of thirst or hunger. Many people, especially seniors, or those with underlying health issues, are staying in their homes out of fear of catching the virus.

We all have times when life is unpleasant, not going at all the way we want it to. That is our wilderness experience. For the people of Israel it was partly discipline, and partly preparation for their new life in the Promised Land.

Moses sent 12 men to check out the Promised Land. They returned to report that the cities were well fortified, and the people were much taller than they were. Ten of the spies did not believe that God would lead them to defeat these peoples; instead, they thought these would defeat them.

God knew that the only way His people could survive in the Promised Land was by trusting Him. The 40 years in the wilderness was not about punishing the people for their lack of faith; rather, it was about teaching them to depend on God for everything, so that they could enter the Promised Land, and live there without fear.

At the end of the 40 years, they were prepared to enter the Promised Land.

Our unpleasant times / wilderness times, can be opportunities for us to become prepared; times when we learn to trust more fully in God; times to allow God to show us what He can do, and as He does that, our faith in Him and our love for Him grows. Then we will be prepared for whatever God has planned for us.

If this season of Covid is unpleasant, or a time of fear, I encourage you to take time to sit quietly with God. Tell him how you feel. As him and trust him to lead you through this difficult season. Spend some time each day reading your Bible and listening for God to speak to you through the words and passages that you read. Seek the peace and comfort that only he can give.

In summary, our wilderness experiences are opportunities for God to lead us closer to Him, to trust Him more deeply, to depend on Him to provide for us and guide us, and to prepare us for what He wants us to do in us and through us in the future. Amen

