

# Many Kinds of Wilderness

Sermon for March 1, 2020

First Sunday in Lent

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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. Matthew 4:1-11

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

The Church has now entered the season of Lent. For the next 40 days, we are invited into a spiritual journey. Actually it is 46 days, because there are also 6 Sundays which are not counted as Lent.

The journey begins with Jesus in the wilderness: Each year, on the first Sunday in Lent we read how the spirit took Jesus into the wilderness. And so, on this first Sunday in Lent, I want to begin by remembering some of the wilderness stories from the Bible. The Bible is full of wilderness stories, each with its own geographic and spiritual landscape.

## **The wilderness of liberation**

One of the central stories of our faith is the liberation from slavery. The people of Israel had finally escaped from the slavery in Egypt, and by a miracle they had been led across the red sea, and

when they arrived on the other side, they encountered a vast wilderness. This wilderness was their place of liberation. They were giddy with joy, they sang, they danced, their mouths were filled with laughter. The future was wide open, and everything was possible. They were free at last, free at last, free at last!

### **The wilderness of consecration**

After the escape from Egypt, the people traveled deeper into the wilderness and eventually they reached Mt. Sinai. And there, they had a very profound encounter with God. According to the scriptures, God descended upon Mt. Sinai and then called Moses to come up the mountain. On the mountain God gave Moses the tablets containing the Ten Commandments.

With those tablets and commandments God called the Israelite to enter into a sacred covenant.

This was a great gift. Because after their escape from Egypt the people were free, but they did not know who they were. Throughout their time in Egypt their culture and their faith had been suppressed.

And so it was time to discover their identity as children of God. And that's what happened at Mt. Sinai. In some ways we could say Mt. Sinai was the place of the honeymoon between God and the people of Israel. So we could call this the wilderness of consecration.

### **The wilderness of desolation**

The people had left Egypt with the expectation of traveling to Palestine which was to be their promised homeland. But the progress towards their new homeland was very slow. A year passed, and then another, and then another, and in the end they spent 40 years in the wilderness. Why? Did it really take that long to get from Egypt to the Palestine? If you look at a map, you can see that the distance is less than 350 miles. Basically, it is the distance from San Francisco to Los Angeles, not all that far. And now, consider that many pioneers in America managed to cross the entire continent in about 6 months. No, it should not have taken 40 years to get to Palestine.

And yet, that's how long it took. Sometimes, they stayed in one place for a long time, sometimes they were blocked by enemy tribes who did not let them pass, sometimes they went round and round, staggering and stumbling without finding a good place to live, hungry and thirsty, and often on the brink of exhaustion. It was a time of misery, of frustration, and disappointment. They were in the wilderness of desolation.

### **The wilderness of consolation**

As the people struggled in the wilderness, God kept providing for their needs: When they were hungry, God provided manna, which was some sort of mystical food that fell from heaven. When they were thirsty, God provided water from a mysterious rock that kept following them around. At one point when they craved meat, and God sent a flock of quails which mysteriously fell to the ground. Also, there was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide them and assure them that God was near. They experienced the wilderness of consolation.

### **The wilderness and hope: Be strong! Do not fear!**

Now I am going to fast forward about 600 years: After the Israelites had lived in Palestine for many generations, through spring-times and harvests through famines and abundance, through faithfulness and sin, through war and peace and war again, there came the day when they were conquered by the Babylonians. The Babylonians took them into exile a thousand miles away from their beloved homeland, and between their exile in Babylon and their beloved homeland there stretched a wilderness of endless proportions.

And then, one day, the prophet Isaiah announced God would come and make a way through the wilderness and bring everyone home. And this is what the prophet Isaiah said:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the LORD,  
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God...  
He will come and save you.'*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;*

*no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35 1-10*

### **The wilderness of new beginnings: Return to God**

Now let's fast forward another 500 years and we arrive at the time of John the Baptist. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness and offered a baptism for the forgiveness of sin. This was an opportunity for new beginnings, an invitation to turn around and return to God. A reminder that everyone has a second chance, and even third chance or a 4<sup>th</sup> chance. So we could call this the wilderness of new beginnings.

### **The wilderness of rejection: God, hear my cry!**

I am almost done with my wilderness stories, but there is one wilderness story in particular which I find very heart-breaking, and that is the story of Hagar and her little child Ismael.

The story of Hagar is a story that is rarely told, but I find it an important story for many reasons, so whenever I have a chance, I try to bring it up.

The story of Hagar is tied to the story of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah had hoped to have a child, but year after year passed and they remained childless. Finally, Sarah lost all hope and asked Abraham to have a child with her slave girl, and then Sarah was going to claim that child as her own.

The slave girl in question was Hagar, and Abraham proceeded as instructed, and Hagar became pregnant. But then things did not go according to Sarah's script. Hagar refused to stay in the role of the lowly servant, she was the mother of Ismael, the son of Abraham and she was proud of it. This caused a lot of tension between the two women.

And then a miracle happened. At long last Sarah became pregnant as well. She gave birth to a son called Isaac, and now suddenly there were two mothers and two sons, and Sarah could no longer tolerate the competition. Sarah turned to Abraham and demanded, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son. He is not going to share the inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won't have it!" Abraham was very upset by this request, but still, he complied. And early next morning he took Hagar and Ismael, and gave them a bit of food and a container of water and cast them out into the wilderness.

Hagar wandered in the wilderness until her food and water was gone. Then she put her son in the shade of a bush and went a hundred yards away and sat down. "I don't want to watch the boy die," she said, as she burst into tears. But God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to

Hagar from heaven, "Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid!

God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants." Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well full of water. She quickly filled her water container and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness. He became a skillful archer and he settled in the wilderness of Paran.

When I think of the story of Hagar, I can't help thinking of the families at our Southern border, their suffering and their despair.

And I am also thinking of the families in Syria right now, who are running for their lives but have nowhere to go. It is bitter cold there right now, and already several children have frozen to death. These are the modern day versions of the story of Hagar, Stories where people have been left to die in the wilderness, but God sees them and hears their cries.

### **Jesus in the wilderness: Saying no to false solutions**

And now, finally, let's consider today's gospel reading: the story of Jesus in the wilderness. When the spirit led Jesus into the wilderness he entered not just one particular wilderness, but all forms of wilderness which God's people have encountered and which we still encounter today.

He entered the moments when our mouth was full of laughter, when we were giddy with joy at our unexpected liberation. He entered the moments when we were deeply moved by a profound encounter with the holy. He entered the moments when we struggled with disappointment and discouragement, when we cried and sigh: How long, oh God, how long?

He entered the moment when we had suffered rejection and injustice, when we were cast out and thrown away. He entered the moments when we needed a word of hope and encouragement, when we needed an assurance that there would be a way home. He entered the moments when we needed had lost our way and needed a new beginning,

Jesus entered all our human struggles, all our joys and all our heartbreaks, all our hopes, and all our hurts. And in this way he became one of us.

I don't know about you, but whenever I encounter a person who suffers from terrible pain, pain of the body or pain of the heart, or pain of the soul, I wish I had a magic wand and could somehow make all the pain go away.

But of course, I don't have a magic wand, so the best I can offer is to be a caring presence, and sometimes I fail even at that. But Jesus did have a magic wand, or at least he did have the power that comes with being the son of God. But what was the right way to use this power?

This is what I think the temptation was all about.

And so here is what I imagined might have happened in the desert between Jesus and the devil: And by the way, I don't picture the devil as hoofed creature with a tail and horns the way he looks in medieval paintings. For me, he is the embodiment of a voice which tempts us to chose the wrong path, to look for shortcuts, to trust in false solutions, and to take the easy way out.

The easy way out for Jesus would have been to use his power as the child of God to fix all the hear-break. I think that was what the temptation was about, that he had an opportunity to avoid the

difficult path set before him, and there was a moment when he could have chosen to use his power in that way.

But ultimately, Jesus said no to the short-cuts and yes to the difficult path.

And the question which Lent asks of us is this: Must Jesus walk the path alone? Or will we come alongside Jesus? Can we accompany Jesus the way Jesus accompanies all of humanity? Will we visit with Jesus the landscapes of the heart, the beautiful places the difficult places and bear witness to the presence of God. Will we walk with Jesus and will we let Jesus walk with us?

Amen.