

Message for February 26, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church

“Wilderness Beginnings” Rev. Trish Eckert

- Matthew 4: 1-11

“The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.” This is one of the key phrases teachers use in “Godly Play,” a popular Sunday School curriculum designed for young children. Many of you are familiar with Godly Play, as Pastor Karen was trained in the curriculum and provided it here at Tippe. As kids run their fingers through large, wooden sandboxes, “Godly Play” teachers invite them to picture the scorched landscapes Biblical characters encountered as they sought to follow God. Fierce heat, jagged rocks, wild animals, blistered feet.

This week’s lectionary reading is about a long and treacherous stint in the wilderness, and I’ll bet that if Matthew had had Godly Play guidebooks at his disposal when he wrote his account of Jesus’s temptation, he would have opened it with the same signature lines: “The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

Just prior to today’s reading, Matthew tells us that Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized. We learn that just as he came out of the water, the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. Then we hear, “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” (Matthew 3:13-17)

The next thing we know, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” (Matthew 4:1) Tons of questions immediately wash over me - like a Godly Play student, I track Jesus's footsteps in the sand, and wonder about minutiae: How exactly did Jesus spend his time? Was he tempted 24/7? Did he walk for miles each day, or camp out in one spot? Where did he sleep? What was the silence like, hour after hour after hour? Did he break it up by humming, laughing, or shouting? Did he star gaze? Play with birds? Chase lizards? As the days stretched on and on, did he fear for his life? Question his sanity? Wish to die?

The Gospel reading doesn’t reveal any of this. But the details Matthew does include in his account are telling, and they give us much to cling to as we face deserts in our own lives. I’d like to focus on three:

Jesus didn’t choose the wilderness.

The struggle is long.

There are angels in the desert.

First, Jesus didn’t meander into the wilderness. He didn’t schedule a National Geographic expedition or plan a wilderness marathon to rack up Fitbit steps. According to Matthew, the Spirit “led” Jesus into the wilderness. “You only go there if you have to.”

Oddly enough, I find this detail comforting. Why? Because it's true — it rings true. We don't choose to enter the wilderness. We don't volunteer (generally) for pain, loss, danger, or terror. But the wilderness happens, anyway. Whether it comes to us in the guise of a hospital waiting room, a thorny relationship, a troubled child, a sudden death, or a crippling panic attack, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps. It insists on itself. And sometimes — can we bear to ponder this? — it is God's own Spirit who drives us into the parched landscape amidst the wild beasts. Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us? That he wants us to suffer? I don't think so. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most barren periods of our lives? That our deserts can become holy even as they remain dangerous? Yes. I believe so.

I say this with hesitation, too aware of how Christians have suffered under the false teaching that God authors human pain and suffering for some greater good of God's devising. God does not. But we walk a fine line, nevertheless. Sometimes our journeys with God include dark and desolate places. Not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a fragile, broken world that includes deserts, and because God's *modus operandi* is to take the things of death and wring from them resurrection.

Second, our wilderness journeys sometimes last a long, long time. I've never spent forty days in solitude and silence, much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger, but I can't imagine that Jesus's time in the wilderness passed by quickly. The sense I get from Matthew's gospel is that Jesus strove and wrestled. That he experienced each day as a battle of mind, spirit, and body. Maybe the hours stretched into years, and the nights felt endless. Maybe the landscape itself mocked his weary senses, its unvarying bleakness breaking his heart.

For those of us who live in quick-fix cultures, this aspect of the wilderness can be especially trying, because we both tire and despair easily. Why, we ask, is this pain not ending? Why are our prayers going unanswered? Where is God?

But maybe we need to ask a harder question: why did Jesus need the wilderness? Why do we?

In a beautiful sermon on this gospel story, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz Weber suggests that temptation (Jesus's and ours) is always about identity — about who we are and whose we are. She writes, "Identity. It's always God's first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God's own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school — they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation."

During Jesus' baptism, just before being led into the wilderness, God announced Jesus's identity loud and clear: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased." But what happened to that certain sense of identity and belonging, I wonder, as Jesus's wilderness wanderings stretched into week two, week three, week four? Did it begin to waver? Did the Son of God have to keep reminding himself of who he was? Did his parent have to nudge him each time he forgot? "Can you hear me now? Can you hear that you are precious and beloved now? Can your identity as my own hold in this oppressive silence, here, now?"

I grew up in a Christian community that treated Jesus's humanity with a great deal of squeamishness. Though we affirmed the Incarnation in our creeds and our worship, we resisted examining its implications too closely. To linger too long over what Jesus's enfleshed life might have looked, smelled, tasted, and felt like? To consider the possibility that the Son of God might have wrestled with his identity? His vocation? His relationship to God? To argue that the greatest danger Jesus faced in the wilderness was not starvation but amnesia? That was too much. That was heretical.

But it's true. At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was. That was the easy part. The much harder part came in the wilderness when he had to face down every vicious assault on that truth. When the memory of God's voice from heaven faded, and he had to learn how to be God's beloved in a lonely wasteland. Maybe we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God's beloved. Because the unnerving fact is: we can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be beloved and unsafe at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft. Salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time.

Third, there were angels in the wilderness. This, too, is a startling and comforting truth — one that we can recognize if we open our eyes and take a good look around. Somehow, somewhere, help comes. Rest comes. Solace comes. Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we might prefer, but they come.

I wonder what Jesus's angels looked like. Did they manifest as winged creatures from heaven? As comforting breezes across the sun-scorched hills? As a trickle of water for his parched throat? As a wild animal that surprised him with a tame and tender gaze? As a rock to lay his head upon? As the swirl of constellations on a clear, cloudless night?

What do your angels look like? What have they looked like in the past? When they ministered to you, held you, braced you, did you hear a new version of God's voice, calling you his beloved? If yes, then what would it be like to enter into someone else's barren desert now, and become an angel for their journey?

"The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to." This week, we begin the wilderness journey of Lent. We start on Ash Wednesday, acknowledging via

the imposition of ashes that we will surely die, that our bodies will fail us no matter how cleverly we attempt to preserve them with medicine, exercise, cosmetics, or mindfulness. From that austere beginning, we venture into the wilderness like Abraham, like Moses, like Elijah, and like Jesus. With ashes on our foreheads and mortality on our minds, we begin a hazardous journey inward, a journey to learn our true names, our true identities.

I pray that we'll walk with courage into the deserts we can't choose or avoid. I pray that our long stints in the wilderness will teach us who we really are. And I pray that when angels in all their sweet and secret guises whisper "beloved" into our ears, we will listen, and believe them.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As we enter into the landscape that the season of Lent offers us, what's stirring in your own interior terrain? What part of your earth might God be inviting you to open up or allow to give way? Is there something you need to let go of, something(s) to which you need to say, "not this," in order to make way for this? Is there a wild space—inner or outer—that would help you choose what you need for a more whole life? ~ Questions from Rev. Jan L. Richardson - excerpted from her blog, "The Painted Prayer Book"