

Message for March 5, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday in Lent
“Mystery in the Wilderness” Rev. Trish Eckert

We are just barely into Lent, a season suffused with wilderness and desert. Yet with its imagery of water and of Spirit, this Sunday’s Gospel reading brings us a welcome reminder that God provides sustenance to us in every season. And the psalmist echoes this reminder.

The Psalmist asks, “from where will my help come?” And then we are reminded that we are *kept/protected/fortified* by God. Psalm 121 is a comforting psalm, presenting an ever-present and attentive God caring for her people. It is a psalm that many pray or recite in difficult times when they want to feel God’s comforting presence. Like many psalms, the powerful words of the song transcend the experiences of most people. We do come to harm, whether it’s the minor harm of a sunburn or the greater harms inflicted by a broken world. Yet there are times when a person may find herself inexplicably spared from some harm or danger by no means of her own. At those times the words of this psalm speak to faith in a God who does indeed protect us.

The hymn of Psalm 121 reminds us of the power of song when trudging through difficult or perilous wilderness spaces. In the wilderness of seeking justice, our songs give us courage and strength to climb even the highest of hills.

This text from John’s Gospel invites us to eavesdrop on the visit that Nicodemus pays to Jesus shortly after Jesus clears out the temple. The fact that Jesus and Nicodemus have their conversation at night seems fitting not just because the darkness offers a measure of protection and secrecy for Nicodemus, away from the eyes of his fellow Pharisees, but because Jesus speaks here of a mystery. In response to the question that Nicodemus asks about being born anew, Jesus does not really provide a clear explanation. Yet in his words about water and Spirit, about birthing and love, Jesus offers something better than an explanation: he extends to Nicodemus, and to us, an invitation to a relationship and to a journey of transformation.

Sometimes the wilderness mystifies and scares us. We witness Nicodemus approach Jesus, desperate for concrete answers to swallow up his doubt. Instead, Jesus offers him poetry and mystery, pointing him to the wildness of the Spirit.

Lent finds many of us in the midst of very personal wilderness experiences—the wilderness of discerning a major life change, the wilderness of starting anew under the shroud of grief, the wilderness of seeking connection in a deeply polarized culture, the wilderness of finding your way through a difficult season, the wilderness of listening for God in the swirl of questions and doubt, the wilderness of self-discovery and personal growth, the wilderness of getting lost over and over again.

The good news of the wilderness is that nothing is static or still. Grains of sand harden into stone. The mid-day heat gets swallowed up by evening's chill. The creatures of the day fall quiet as the creatures of the night awake. Everything is always in transition, ever-changing. The wilderness is harsh and sometimes scarce, but new life persists in unexpected places. Even if you are walking in circles, you are getting somewhere. And so, this Lent, let's carry a few questions with us along the way: *Where is God meeting me in the wilderness? What can the wilderness teach me? What do I need to learn before I can find my way out?*

We are filled with questions, which can be overwhelming and frustrating. Yet, I think in order to move through wilderness times, we must give attention and voice to our questions. We cannot see or come to understand or wake up without questions. It seems the entry point to this story is to see yourself in it.

Ultimately, we can certainly relate to Nicodemus – he is approaching Jesus with questions, with doubt, with confusion. He is hesitant – he's not prepared to let what he hears change his life. He isn't willing to walk into the mystery in the wilderness. Who among us is? How many of us just go skipping off into the wilds? Jesus himself is at least "led" into the wilderness, and Mark says he was "driven" into the wilderness – tested, tempted, pushed to his limits.

There is a long poem, written by W.H. Auden, entitled, "For the Time Being," and this verse came to me as I reflected on the journey of Nicodemus and the wilderness journey itself. Auden wrote,

"He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures."

The reader is encouraged to let go of expectations and truly live the experience of following God, who is unlike anything we know. So often we strive to *decipher* the mystery. Ultimately, we're invited to go encounter the divine more deeply, to embrace and immerse ourselves in the mystery.

It can be particularly hard for those of us who think concretely to be able to let go and truly experience this wilderness where the Spirit has led us. Nicodemus is one such thinker, and he tries so hard to understand, that he ends up missing the point. In this case, metaphor becomes a tool to put words around that which is impossible to comprehend.

Of course, these metaphors and abstract ideas are followed by one of the most well-known verses in Christianity: John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in God may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Often used as a way to summarize the entire Gospel story, John 3:16 is a simple, direct, concrete verse in an otherwise obscure chapter. Unfortunately, we tend to memorize John 3:16 without the important addition of John 3:17. John 3:16 is sometimes turned into a weapon against “unbelievers,” but verse 17 offers the corrective that condemnation was not the point: *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

In this one passage we hold the shifting nature of God: both abstract and concrete, both incomprehensible and simple. In fact, it is only by this clashing of opposites, these paradoxes, the things that do not make sense, that we are able to begin to understand the transcendent nature of God.

Jesus’ words in this passage prompt me to ponder, where am I turning my attention these days? How do I seek to do what Jesus invited Nicodemus to do: to turn my attention, to turn my gaze toward him—not merely to escape punishment, but as my response to the love that impelled God to send us Christ? And who better to walk alongside us and guide us and love us, than one who knows what it is to be driven into the wilderness?

These questions were inspired by a beautiful reflection written by Jan L Richardson, and as we enter a few minutes for contemplation, I invite you to consider her queries here:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Where are you turning your gaze in these Lenten days? What are you steeping your imagination in? What are you giving your eyes, ears, mind, and soul to? Stories, images, metaphors, poetry, art: what is the culture that you are creating and participating in, or long to be? How does this help you encounter the incarnate presence of the God who came solely for love of you? Queries adapted from Rev Jan L Richardson’s blog, [The Painted Prayerbook](#)