



“God Comes Into Our Wilderness”

Text: Mark 1:9-15

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The Center for Congregations recently advertised grants up to \$40,000 to congregations for assisting their members in mental health issues. I brought this up to Session to see if they thought the congregation would be interested and one Session member gave an emphatic YES! So, with the generous help of Lynn Kyle, we put together the initial application.

I thought about the need for mental health support for this congregation because of the extensive amount of loss that you have gone through in the past two years, not just with the passing of Kevin, but with the passing of so many other beloved members of this church - some of whom were leaders in this church, but all were beloved spouses, friends, mothers, fathers, siblings. Loss. Challenge. Death. It is how we start Lent with Ash Wednesday - ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This may be how the Christian season of Lent begins: with an acknowledgement of human mortality and a recognition that, before it is over, life will likely put us in some kind of wilderness and, for many of us, already has.

I don't remember the church I grew up in offering ashes. I remember always seeing the ashes on my Catholic friends' foreheads. I'm not sure if it was my Presbyterian church that didn't use ashes or that my parents just never attended the service. I don't know what your experience is with receiving ashes, but I've come to appreciate the act over the years, because it reminds me of my complete dependence upon God. It also reminds me of the great sacrifice God through Jesus Christ went through for me.

Having done so much work in hospitals and hospice, I know the devastation patients and families go through when given that life-altering diagnosis. We avoid death as much as we can. We try not to think about it. When we have to talk about it, we like to do so in purely academic terms. And our feel good society likes to skip over all the challenges of Lent and get right to the Hallelujah! He is Risen! Moment. Ash Wednesday, Lent, Good Friday, the Crucifixion - these are not market-friendly concepts (See Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: the Lost Language of Salvation*, p.71)

The aim of Lent, of course, is to get us appropriately to Easter. Easter takes preparation. The simple gladness, the almost unspeakable joy of Easter, requires a bit of disciplined work, a bit of honest pondering of the human condition. Resurrection doesn't happen in a bubble. It comes after suffering, crucifixion, dying.

From the beginning, Christian people have gotten themselves ready for the big day by traveling with Jesus on the way to the cross, sometimes making sacrifices themselves to identify with his self-sacrifice, stopping along the way to ponder the ways his journey and our journeys intersect. And the way it begins, in each of the accounts we have of his journey - the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - is with a character called John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, a life-changing experience of God and a sense of new direction, new vocation, and then three of the four Gospels - the earliest, Matthew, Mark and Luke - all agree that the very next thing that happens is that Jesus goes into the wilderness. For forty days, to be exact. While he is there, he is tempted by Satan, and at the end of it, angels come to him. Then he emerges, and the story of his remarkable three-year campaign of teaching, healing, reconciling, and saving commences.

Let's focus, just for a moment, on the way Mark tells it.

Mark is in a hurry for some reason. The book he wrote is much shorter than the others by about half. Mark is in a hurry. He uses the word immediately a lot. He doesn't dawdle or editorialize much. He gets right to the point. In his introduction to the story of Jesus of Nazareth, he packs a lot of material into a few sentences. Jesus, Mark says, was baptized by John. He saw the heavens ripped open and the Spirit of God descending, a little like a dove. He heard a voice say, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Then that same Spirit drives him into the wilderness, where he remains for forty days, tempted by Satan. There are wild beasts out there in the wilderness, and at the end of it, angels come to him.

Think first about the Spirit that descended on Jesus. Notice that Mark says that Jesus is the only one who saw it. This is intensely personal for him. It is not a public display. Mark says the same thing about the voice. Jesus alone heard it. It was for him, personally. Notice that the Spirit that comes to him gently, like a dove, also drives him - doesn't invite him, doesn't gently lead him - drives him into the wilderness, or desert. Mark chooses very strong language. The Spirit literally "throws him out" into the wilderness. That is quite different from the way we mostly think about the Spirit of God: gentle, calming, reassuring, comforting. Sometimes we even call the Spirit the Comforter. But here the Spirit discomferts, shakes things up, rearranges the spiritual furniture, sets Jesus on a new path, and puts him down in the wilderness.

Wilderness, by the way, is an interesting idea in the Bible. In one of our oldest stories, Moses is tending sheep "beyond the wilderness" of Midian and God appears, accosts Moses in a burning bush. Moses, at the moment, is not just tending sheep; he's on the run, hiding in the wilderness. He's wanted for murder in Egypt, and it is in the wilderness of all that complexity - physical, geographical, emotional, and spiritual - that God comes to Moses, blindsides him, turns him around, and sends him back to Egypt to lead his people to freedom. That's the kind of thing that happens in the wilderness.

When Moses succeeds in his unlikely venture of liberating his people from slavery and leading them out of Egypt, it's back to the wilderness. As the twelve tribes wander in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, Israel is born, tribes become a people, a law is given, a covenant made. That's the kind of thing that happens in the wilderness. You may not volunteer to go there. You may not like it there at all. But the strong biblical suggestion is that in the wilderness it is highly likely that God will come to you and things will change and you will never be quite the same again.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says, “You are never far from the wilderness when you are in the promised land.” The wilderness of unexpected illness, for instance. Do you remember Randy Pausch? He wrote the book, *The Last Lecture* after he received his terminal diagnosis. He was sailing along in his successful academic and high-tech research career, loving his wife and three children, and out of the blue receiving the devastating verdict that he had just a few months to live. Pausch decided to live fully in that wilderness, share it with students and write a book before he died, *The Last Lecture*.

Frederick Buechner, in an autobiographical memoir, remembers the lonely wilderness of his daughter’s anorexia nervosa. He wanted to be a father who could and would do anything to protect his daughter and make her well, until finally he understood that he could not solve her problem because he was, of course, part of the problem - “I was in hell” (*Telling Secrets*, pp. 24-25).

This church and this nation finds itself in a wilderness this morning: continuing in the in-between of installed pastorates, continuing to grieve and to adjust to the changes happening in your church family; and in the country a broken government and endless attacks on women’s rights and LGBTQ+ rights seem endless and feels like we’ve traveled back in time. And then there are the wars that we now see images of in real time, images of deep human suffering; and, of course, there is the personal suffering of grief and loss, illness, financial challenges, broken relationships, loneliness, depression.

We are in a new place, an unsettling place, and while I do not believe God is in the business of correcting and restructuring national and global affairs, per se, I believe in God, and I do believe that there are always - because God comes in the wilderness - possible redemptive, creative, and good outcomes. No good, of course, comes from losing your health, your loved one, your pastor. But there is the possibility that these challenges will remind us and teach us something important. The wilderness can teach us about values and the value of things, the true value of what you treasure most: your dear ones, your friends, your music, your books.

The late Tim Russert, NBC News Washington Bureau Chief, editor and host of *Meet the Press*, wrote a wonderful book about his father, *Big Russ*: a strong, gentle, and always modest man who worked hard all his life, raised his family in a blue-collar neighborhood of South Buffalo, and was always admired and respected by his friends. He told his father that one day he would buy him a Cadillac. It was the car his father had always wanted. When Tim could afford to buy his father that Cadillac, his father instead chose a Ford Victoria.

As they drove that Ford out of the dealership, Tim asked his father why he picked that car over the Cadillac. His dad said, “Do I think it’s a better car? No. But if I came home with a big, fancy Cadillac, do you know what people would say? ‘What happened to Tim? He’s showing off. He got too big for us. His kid made it and now he’s driving a Cadillac.’ No, I can’t do that. This is what I want. This is who I am” (*Big Russ and Me*, pp. 215-218).

If there is a bright side to this wilderness, it is that we will learn again virtues we may have forgotten: modesty, frugality, responsibility, community, and the real value, the precious value, of the things we love most.

Kathleen Norris, in a new book, *Acedia and Me*, describes in wilderness terms the illness and death of her husband, David. Stuck in a cheap motel room because it was near the hospital where David was receiving treatment, television was the only diversion. Snacks from the vending machine warmed in the room’s microwave became her sustenance. It was a depressing wilderness. She knew how serious his respiratory situation was. Nevertheless, when he died, she was “numb with loss. . . . I had lost my identity as a married woman. The community of two that had constituted my marriage was no more, and I had no idea how I would inhabit the

devastating word, widow. As for prayer, I was not surprised . . . that when I needed the consolation that prayer can bring, I was unable to pray" (pp. 249-250).

That is the wilderness of grief, the terrible loneliness of grief that feels like utter abandonment, isolation. Finally Kathleen found a prayer she could pray in the wilderness.

This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. (*Acedia and Me*)

God comes into our wilderness. That is the promise. We are not finally alone there. In the lonely wilderness of illness and grief, angels come to wait on us. The church is there, friends are there, reaching out to touch and comfort and hold us, reminders that God is there, that we are held tightly by the One who loves us.

Angels came to Jesus, reminders that he was God's beloved Son, reminders of the voice he heard on the day of his baptism.

Denise Levertov, a wonderful poet, has written a poem, *Primary Wonder*, about God coming in the wilderness:

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes; caps and bells.

And then

once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed one, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.

(*Sands of the Well*, p. 129)

Angels came to Jesus in the wilderness, reminders of the voice he heard that day before the wilderness: "You are my beloved Son: with you I am well pleased."

Rodney Hunter of the Candler School of Theology writes, "IS IT NOT PRECISELY this message that we are privileged to hear . . . in the gospel of Jesus Christ - in our own unique way we are the beloved daughters and sons of God?" (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2). "Must we not also recognize that through him we too have been given a name, an identity, a worth and dignity as human beings that is rooted and grounded with all the saints in the eternal, unconditional, unalterable being and love of God?"

That is the news that ripped open the heavens that day long ago when Jesus was baptized and driven by the Spirit into the wilderness.

And that is the news - you are a beloved daughter, a beloved son of God - in whatever wilderness you find yourself this morning. In Jesus Christ, the beloved Son, we are all God's beloved children.

Lent will end with Easter morning.
Amen.