

Walking in the Wilderness (Lent 2)

Luke 4:1-13

March 13, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

Do you remember a couple of Sundays ago, when we all were ridiculously, out-of-proportion happy that the sun was shining? We bordered on giddy, really. We all commented on it, and then after church here in the building, we were saying something along the lines of “wow, we must have all had a hard week, to be so happy to see the sunshine.”

It’s because we’re walking in the wilderness.

Maybe I’m just getting older. Maybe I’m just more aware of what’s going on in the world, and in our country. Maybe I just know too many people. But it sure seems to me like there’s a new tragedy to absorb at least every couple of days. It sure seems to me like a whole lot of people are going through tough times. Like a whole lot of people are dealing with way too much.

We’re walking in the wilderness.

Not literally, of course. But wilderness, nevertheless. We’re all together in this pandemic wilderness. Much as we’d like to think it’s all over and we’re leaving it all behind us, we have that nagging feeling that it’s not. And even if it were really over and done with, we’re still not over it, and we’re starting to realize that we won’t be. “Back to normal” isn’t going to happen. How can it? A million people gone, just in the United States. Something more than six million people worldwide? Those peoples’ deaths make a difference, and we are different because they are no longer here. Not to mention those who are now disabled from the disease itself. Those whose mental illnesses have gotten worse from the pandemic and the adjustments we’ve had to make. It’s a wilderness. We’re still walking through it, and two years in, we can say with some authority, that it’s hard, difficult in ways we could have never imagined.

We’re living in the wilderness of a world at war. A world where people are being killed and terrorized by forces more powerful than they are, where people are leaving everything they’ve ever known and becoming refugees. And that’s not just in one place in the world, but several. And we comfort ourselves in this wilderness by saying, “well, we don’t have it as bad as they do,” which is true, but it is still a wilderness.

We’re living in the wilderness of a country struggling to find itself, to know who we are and figure out our priorities.

And besides all these wildernesses that we share, we each have our own wildernesses. Our bodies have diseases and disabilities. So do our minds. So do our loved ones. We can't forgive ourselves, or someone else. We turn aside from broken relationships because we can't fix them single-handedly. Our regrets keep us up at night. The road not taken, and the one taken instead.

In all these wildernesses, we are tempted. We're tempted to take the easy way out, even if it hurts someone else. We're tempted to pretend that the wilderness isn't real, or that if it's real, it's not so bad after all. We're tempted to use what little power we have for our own good. We're tempted to either blame the whole wilderness on someone else, or ourselves, or God.

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, for forty days. A wilderness where he experienced loss and loneliness and hunger both physical and spiritual. A wilderness where his body suffered, and his mind suffered, and his spirit suffered. A wilderness where he was tempted to take the easy way out, to use his power for his own benefit, to alleviate his own suffering no matter the cost. Jesus knew the wilderness.

And none of that is very uplifting. Our wildernesses and the temptations they taunt us with. Jesus's wilderness and the tempting devil that appeared in it. But sometimes it is a relief to speak the truth, hard though it may be. Acknowledging the desolation and suffering and just plain hard of our wilderness can be a relief. It doesn't make the wilderness go away. But telling the truth about our wilderness keeps us from having to use our energy pretending like it isn't there.

The wilderness seems like a lonely place. Jesus was alone in his wilderness, seems like. And it seems like we're alone in ours. Nobody gets what it's like to be us. Nobody has quite our combination of worries and woes and despair. True enough. But Jesus wasn't alone, and neither are we.

Jesus was raised and firmly rooted in the Jewish scriptures and tradition. And throughout the Hebrew scriptures, he would have read and known stories of the wilderness. In none of those stories were the people alone. We read from Exodus earlier, that the presence of God was with them in a pillar of cloud and a column of fire. Later the presence of God was with them in the tabernacle. God provided them with manna and quail and water, despite their complaining.

Jesus carried that wilderness tradition with him, and he carried scripture with him, scripture that had formed and shaped him as he grew and matured, scripture that stuck with him when he needed it the most. Jesus was never alone in his wilderness, and neither are we in ours.

Just last week, we read John the Baptist quoting from Isaiah, about making a path in the wilderness. And what makes a path, but many footsteps on the same ground, footsteps that we don't make alone.

Jesus knows what it is like to be in the wilderness, to feel like we're alone even though we aren't, to feel like circumstances are overwhelming and beyond our coping capabilities. Jesus also knows what it is to experience the presence of God in the midst of the wilderness.

I'm not ruling out a pillar of fire or a column of cloud, but I'm also not expecting it to appear. I'm not ruling out manna or quail or water in the desert, but I'm not expecting that either. I am counting on God to be here, though. I'm counting on God to be present in scripture, in the faith that has brought us this far. I'm trusting God to be present in and through you, and I hope you're trusting God to be present in and through each other. I'm counting on the path in the wilderness, the path that Jesus has gone on before us.

Walking through the wilderness isn't easy. It wasn't easy for Jesus, and it wasn't easy for the ancient Israelites, and it's not easy for us. But signs of God's presence are all around us and within us. Let us walk with the assurance that we are not alone.