

Rev. Adrienne Meier
February 21, 2021, First Sunday in Lent
St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

What the Wilderness Gives

Mark 1:9-15 NRSV, emended — *In those days (when John the Baptizer was proclaiming repentance) Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Then the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels came and waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee— proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

One of the greatest wildernesses of our lives is grief. Few of us will reach the end of our days without a beloved friend or spouse or child dying. Few of us will come to the end of our lives without experiencing trauma — where the path we thought we were on is simply no longer an option. Circumstances beyond our control and completely unfair have closed all the doors and windows and turned out the lights. Where do we go from here? We are left with a feeling of being unmoored as the tide puts us out to sea and away from the familiar shoreline we've grown to love, or of standing still on a beach as the waves eke away at the sand under our feet; our foundation is not as firm as we thought. Our next great work will be to hear what is spoken in this space and to trust that whatever we take away is for us.

In today's gospel story, Jesus is blown by the Spirit into the wilderness. And whatever happens there, he emerges from the wilderness with a strong sense of self, a purpose, a message to share: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Whatever happens in the wilderness, he is given what he needs to take the next faithful step.

The word wilderness generally means an uninhabited place. The Greek word leads more in the direction of an arid desert, while the word in Hebrew refers more to ground that is unowned and uncultivated, and, thus, suitable for grazing animals. While I'm drawing this word today from Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, the Biblical concept of wilderness is steeped in the Hebrew language and culture. There, in Hebrew, the word is *midbar*, and the root of this word, *dabar*, surprisingly, means *speaking*. The "m" at the front can mean "from" or "without." Richard Swanson suggests a translation of "wordless."

This reminds me that, in the beginning, the Spirit, the breath of God moved over the uninhabitable wilderness and, when God spoke, creation flowered into existence. The

wilderness could, then, be the place where God has not yet spoken. There is a beauty to that - that we who are in the wilderness of life are in a space where we might yet see God speak and creation birthed.

And yet, if you've spent any time in wild areas, you know that God is already there. In the book of Job, God speaks from the whirlwind about what happens far from human eyes that God knows and loves: lions and raven hunt prey for their children, mountain goats and deer give birth, the wild ass wanders, and unbelievable creatures make their home. To suggest that the wilderness is somehow devoid of God is to suggest that God's only relationship with creation is through humanity. That God only delights in what delights us. That God's understanding of the world mirrors our own. What a terrifying reality. I do not know why I have wandered the wilderness of grief, but I know that I am comforted that the stranger monsters I have found there are as equally beloved by God as I am.

Perhaps this is a wordless place because it is a great departure from the coming and going of our day-to-day lives. The circumstances of grief and trauma often put us into a weird time warp: as we make arrangements, sift through memories, provide for our long-term safety and security, the world around us quiets. Like Jacob, we find ourselves away from other people and finally able to wrestle with God and with the questions that have been bubbling within us. In the wilderness, we are away from easy answers; we are away from distractions. There is no path; we must make our own way, but even in the wilderness we are given what we need.

In this way, I think, the wilderness is the place for speaking. It isn't the place for pompous speeches, for eloquent sermons. It isn't even the place for complete thoughts. The wilderness is the place where meaning is made - often on a level deeper than words. I mentioned recently, I think, the way Godly Play speaks of what happens in the wilderness - how the people, Noah or Abraham or Moses - draw so near to God and God draws so near to them that they know what God wants for them. It isn't that they "hear" God in the normal way per se, but that something happens and God is involved and they understand. They are given what they need.

I have been reading a wonderful book by Kaitlin Curtice called ***Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God***. In this book, Curtice tries to convey her understanding of faith through the lens of her identity as a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation. Of course, this is a good place to acknowledge that our congregation stands on the ancestral lands of the Potawatomi Nation, as well as the lands of the Miami, Delaware, and Shawnee people. The power of Curtice's book is its vision of both new and deeply ancient ways of being church, of naming and mourning the use and abuse of the church. But the book also contains deeply moving descriptions of Curtice's faith life, which centers often on nature. I cannot help but think about the wilderness as a place for speaking when I hear her words:

“Growing up in the Baptist tradition, I heard little mention of communicating with God through the earth. On Sundays we would often hear sermons about how prayer is something we should just *try harder at*, instead of something we enter into. When I began to pray in Potawatomi, I understood something different about prayer—that it is a holistic act that involves all of me, and all of the creatures around me, communing with God. If we truly believe that God surrounds us, we believe that prayer is an everyday experience of being alive. It may not look the same for me as it does for you; you won’t practice the way I practice as a Potawatomi woman, but when you step outside and engage with the world in quiet listening, prayer will be happening, and it will take on its own way of being for you. Perhaps prayer is just poetry, and we are living expressions of what it means to be human. That is why the Creator gave us gifts to remember. This is why, when I burn sage or lay tobacco down, I know that I am tethered to a love that has remained steady throughout the centuries and that always calls me back to its own sacredness. And that sacredness will always lead me back out to the world to do the work of love. Prayer is always an invitation.”

I don’t mentioned Curtice’s story because we should do exactly as she does - that would be appropriation, taking something isn’t ours to have - but because she writes, here, a wilderness story. Where, even without words, God speaks.

Beloved, in whatever wilderness you’re wandering, may you hear God’s voice in whispers, in shouts, in acts of kindness. Whether you are grieving or anxious, whether you have made peace with where you are or wish to be somewhere else, may you have all you need.

Amen.