

Out of the Wilderness

Series: *The Meaning of Jesus; Mark 1: 9-15*

The journey of life is not so much a straight shot like on an interstate highway. It's not even like traveling on a crooked winding road. This journey, rather, is a rhythm, a movement between what is and what will be. It is the movement between challenge and accomplishment on the way to more challenge. It's the movement from grief to healing. It includes more loss and more healing. Life's journey is the rhythm of failure on its way to growth.

We are now in the church's season of Lent. This time of special observance is how the church, over time, reflects the reality of life. Lent reminds us of the importance of reflection, introspection, and self-examination. It is a season when life drives us into the wilderness. There's a good example of this in gospel lesson.

The rhythm of life for Jesus was set early in Mark's gospel. He went as part of the crowd going to see John the Baptist and seeking John's baptism. Coming up out of the baptismal water, Jesus experience God's Spirit descending like a dove - a mystical experience. According to Mark's gospel, that vision was the beginning of the messianic era. Jesus' familiar orientation was turned on its head as his life's direction began to coalesce around his choice to walk the narrow road of full commitment, to renounce the old order and embrace God's new creation.

After his baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. He lived with the wild beasts, like the image of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. In the wilderness, the battle with evil was joined. Jesus confronts the "ruler of this world". Mark's gospel account does not give any particulars about the confrontation in the wilderness. It only says that, when Jesus comes out of the wilderness, he begins his ministry and proclaims the "Reign of God". The importance of what happens "in the wilderness" is how it affects, shapes, and maybe determines what happens when you come out.

One of the favorite songs of this congregation is called "Out of the Wilderness". Its words reflect a joyful time, celebrating emergence from the shadows into joyful light, into wholeness, into freedom. This new building represents stepping out of a wilderness for us. It represents so many hopes and dreams. But the challenges have not gone away. We still face the challenge to do ministry here, to grow people here, and to continue to grow up in faith. Coming out of the wilderness does not mean the end of challenges. There always seems to be a new wilderness into which the Spirit drives us.

Into the Woods is a Broadway musical based on fairy tale stories such as Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Rapunsel. Each character faces a challenge and must go into the woods to meet that challenge and find their dream. They, then, come out of the woods and live happily ever after by the end of Act One. In Act Two, however, they discover that there are consequences from their actions in Act One. There is no "happily ever after." So, they go back into the woods to meet the new challenges and battle for their survival.

The rhythm of going into the woods and out of the woods is like the rhythm of going into the wilderness and out of the wilderness. It is the rhythm of the journey of

faith. It is the movement of the journey of life. The importance of our times “in the wilderness” is revealed by what happens, what we do, what we’ve learned, and how we change when we come out of the wilderness. The past seven years, in a sense, have been years in the wilderness. What have we learned as a congregation while we were in the wilderness? (congregation responses)

Though we celebrate coming “out of the wilderness,” it seems clear that we are not finished. What new wilderness awaits us? Where do you see the Spirit driving us for our growth? (congregational responses)

Each of us spends time in the wilderness. These include times of significant transition: from childhood to adolescence or to adulthood. The wilderness can be times of grief, physical challenge, or mental illness. It can be financial hardship or the demands of work and family in tension. In the wilderness, we can confront the truth within ourselves. We can find strength. We have to face the reality of our own humanity and mortality. We can do it knowing that we are in God while we are in the rhythm of life, whether in or out of the wilderness.

first sermon

This is the beginning of a new sermon series, a Lenten series. It is titled *The Meaning of Jesus*. That title sounds rather presumptuous and I use it with thanks and apologies to authors N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg. It is the title of their new book that sheds light on the modern debates over core doctrines of the Christian faith. It is my intention in this series to help shed some light on those key ideas. They include: “what it means when the Bible says, ‘take up your cross’, what is resurrection?, what is atonement?, the meaning of the cross?, who was Jesus?, and who is Jesus?”

To those familiar with this congregation, it won’t surprise you to hear that Crossroads is a community of questioners. We agree about the importance of asking questions and the reality that honest answers are found in relationship with the Spirit, with each other, and in the process of living our lives.

It’s not easy for members of this congregation to affirm a common set of beliefs. Yet, some common belief, commonly held truth, and shared values are a vital source of unity and community. Finding an approach to commonly held theological belief will be the focus of our Lenten journey this year.

I hope to help visualize and verbalize something of that common belief for purposes of unity and not division, for inclusion and not exclusivity. To do this means spending some time in the wilderness. It means having to wrestle with some demons and live with some wild animals. I am counting on aid from angels and I’m counting on your company, on you as community.

This journey leads to life, but it is a hard way and not many find it. Author Elizabeth O’Connor tells us that it is a journey of paying attention and of stepping out from the crowd.

“The persons who would step out of the crowd,” she says, “and follow their own destiny, must keep before them the knowledge that the way is hard ... and that few find it. It will grow easy for them to imagine that they are on the way when they are not. This is where the religious lose

out on the Kingdom. They assume that because they are aware of [this] way and because they have chosen it they are on it. This is to fall comfortably into the sleep of the crowd again. It may well be a 'religious' crowd, but it is nonetheless a crowd.

Crossroads is a community of questioners. We agree about the importance of asking questions and the reality that our answers are found in the process of living our lives. It is not easy for members of this congregation to affirm a common set of beliefs (witness the Values statement), yet common belief is a vital source of unity and community.

Finding an approach to commonly held belief is the focus of our Lenten journey this year. I hope to help visualize and verbalize something of that common belief for purposes of unity, not discord; for inclusion, not exclusivity. To do this means spending some time in the wilderness. It means we'll have to wrestle with some demons and live with some wild animals. I'm counting on aid from angels. I'm also counting on your company.

This journey leads to life, but it is a hard way and not many find it. Elizabeth O'Connor tells us that it is a journey of paying attention and of stepping out from the crowd. "The persons who would step out of the crowd," she says, "and follow their own destiny, must keep before them the knowledge that the way is hard ... and that few find it. It will grow easy for them to imagine that they are on the way when they are not. This is where the religious lose out on the Kingdom. They assume that because they are aware of [this] way, and because they have chosen it, they are on it. This is to fall comfortably into the sleep of the crowd again. It may well be a 'religious' crowd, but it is nonetheless a crowd."

I invite you to walk with me through the season of Lent. We'll walk together into the wilderness. On the journey, we'll see the promise of Easter and affirm that Jesus, the living Christ, walks with us in the wilderness. We'll see the Spirit who invites us to follow the way of Jesus out of the wilderness again.

The invitation of life is to live fully, abundantly, and passionately. It is to give ourselves away in Jesus' name. We worship you God. We follow you and discover that You are free. If we will find you, it will be roaming, wandering, and singing. I want to be free like you. Many of us seek that freedom. We respond to your invitation to walk with you, to dance with you, because you created us to dance and to love. Amen

(based on *I Hear a Seed Growing* by Edwina Gately)