



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 1 Year B

Wilderness

[RCL] **Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15**

In those days 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." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels 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 kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

John was good at his job. John was very good at his job. If you needed someone to be a messenger and prepare a people to turn their hearts, repent, and get right with God, John was the one to call. The voice crying out in the wilderness, the messenger, the baptizer. No matter what you called John, he was the one to go to for a fresh start. Crowds gathered. Scribes were curious. Pharisees plotted. "Prepare the way of the Lord" was the cry of the ancient prophet Isaiah. John embodied that cry. Repent! Be baptized and your sins will be forgiven. The people came from all across the Judean countryside and Jerusalem just to get a glimpse of the would-be messenger in camel hair and leather.

They weren't coming for the locust and honey diet, they were coming to confess. They came into the wilderness to see, to seek repentance. Who doesn't long for forgiveness? Who doesn't want to leave the burdens of the past, the failures, the disappointments, the hurts, and start anew? So, to the wilderness and to the water they came to find John the Baptizer, looking to leave the past behind. A prophet? Maybe Elijah? The Messiah? They had not seen a prophet in a long time. Thus, they tried to label him, to name him, to categorize him. But John knew who he was and whose he was. He was a messenger, a baptizer, and he was good at his job.

"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." –Mark 1:7-8

John was not the "One".

And yet people came. They came to the water and to the wilderness. Longing. Hoping. Expecting. Seeking. Preparing for the “One”. Then he appeared. Jesus of Nazareth. Can anything good come from Nazareth? From nowhere? The whispers started as John saw him coming, along with the recognition that today was the day the messenger would greet the message. Into the water Jesus came. No words were needed because he was the Word. Into the water. Under.

Dripping wet he came up from the water and in the silence, the promised Holy Spirit descended like a dove. Then the voice, like thunder and snowfall, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” Still wet, still dripping, he is driven into the wilderness. Jesus the One, the Word, doesn’t even get to bask in being beloved. The silence is broken by the urgency of the wilderness. No polite invitation, but rather an urgent driving, almost violent force, compels him into the wilderness. The Tempter was waiting.

“Prove yourself,” is the temptation. The Tempter knows that things happen in the wilderness. The wilderness is the mirror, the temptation is to look away. Jesus looks, with the voice of creation still ringing in his ear. “You are my Son, the Beloved.” The days turn to night. Night turns to day. Longing, hoping, praying. Forty days. And then the flutter of wings. The wilderness behind, the work ahead.

If we are honest with ourselves, we try our best to avoid the wilderness. Things happen in the wilderness and we would rather not have things change. The wilderness is where we are forced to see ourselves as we are, without filter or finery. It is there we wander and wait to encounter the holy. Like Jesus, we are sometimes driven against our will, by the Holy Spirit, to the wild places we would rather not go. But the wilderness is where we as individuals and as community must go, because out of the wild comes new life.

During this Lenten season of fasting and focus, of praying and preparing, we are tempted to simply go through the motions. We are tempted to skirt the wilderness, to turn away from encountering the wild places in our lives and in our world. We are tempted to turn away from the mirror of the Tempter. But if we are to follow Jesus, if we are to be renewed for new possibilities and prepared to hope once more, we must face the wild.

Throughout the history of God, we see our spiritual ancestors spending their time wrestling with the barren places. From the call of Abraham and Sarah to the wandering of the people of Israel for forty years, the wilderness has become a place of refining and self-discovery.

But our forbearers never faced the desert alone. For forty years, God journeyed with Israel. For forty days, God watched over Noah. For forty days, God stood with Jesus. And for our time, God will stand with us.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know deep down inside that we need the wilderness. We know in our bones and deep within our souls that the desert calls, cajoles, and compels us even when we resist. Our church, our community, our world—now more than ever—needs the wilderness. We need to spend the time looking at ourselves in order to find new life, new ministry, and new ways of being the people of God.

We long for things to stay the same, for things to be frozen in time. We long for the way things were in the past, but God is calling us, like the people of Israel, to a new future. We cannot get to God's future if we are not able to let go of the past.

God has work for us to do and that work begins, like it did with Jesus, when we are driven to the wild places of discovery.

We go to the wilderness to discover anew the joy of being beloved.

We go to learn once more what it means to be and live as beloved.

We go to listen for the voice of God calling us again.

We go to see Christ more clearly in the world around us.

We go because that is where we encounter God.

We go to the wilderness because we can no longer be as we have always been.

*Till all the jails are empty and all the bellies filled;
till no one hurts or steals or lies, and no more blood is spilled;
till age and race and gender no longer separate;
till pulpit, press, and politics are free of greed and hate:
God has work for us to do.¹*

God's work begins with a pesky Holy Spirit sometimes dragging, driving, and drawing us out into the wilderness. Jesus has been there. The angels are there. His footsteps can still be found. Out in the wilderness, we are faced with many temptations. But the biggest temptation is to not enter the wilderness at all.

The wilderness is calling. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Amen.

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¹ Carl P. Daw, Jr. Words © 1996 Hope Publishing Company

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