

“Out of the Wilderness”

Mark 1:9-15

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The wilderness is that place where nothing is familiar. We don't go there on our own volition. God takes us there. God takes us to an unfamiliar place where we can see ourselves as if for the first time. In the wilderness, we see what God needs us to see, what we have failed to see in familiar surroundings, what we need to see in order to find the wholeness we seek.

Wilderness is a geographical term. It is an emotional term. It is a spiritual term. It is a place, a location, a state of being. When I started reading the Muslim poet, Rumi, I knew I had stepped into a wilderness. The metaphors, the images, and the cadence were all new to me. When I first entered the impressionist gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I knew I was in a wilderness. When I got off the bus and followed Edwin Ayala into a Jamaican bakery on Albany Avenue, I didn't recognize any of the aromas. I knew I was in the wilderness. When I first sat down on a therapist's couch, looked at framed degrees and certifications and a gentleman wearing a turtleneck sweater and a white beard, I thought; 'so this is wilderness.' When the nurse adjusted the radio head set and pushed a button and I moved soundlessly into the tunnel of an MRI scanning machine, I had plunged into the wilderness. When the nurse called to say my father had a glioblastoma multiform brain tumor, I was thrust into the wilderness.

We don't go to these places on our own. God takes us to these places so we can see what God is doing, so we can see who we are as if for the first time, so we can see what we can not see within the confines of our own village.

I often picture Jesus born in the stable in the village of Bethlehem, raised in the carpenter's shop in the small town of Nazareth, living a fairly parochial life. Except for a jaunt down into Egypt during his infancy and a young teenage rebellion one weekend while on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he doesn't get to the wilderness until adulthood. And he doesn't go there by his own initiative. The way Mark records it, the Spirit DROVE him into the wilderness. It was as if God knew that Jesus was still a little green behind the ears, needed to do a little wrestling with the voices of seduction, needed to do some of that growing up work we call self-differentiating. The Spirit DROVE him into the wilderness!

Mark is remarkably scarce about the details of Jesus' wilderness experience. What we do know is that he emerged from the desert with clarity about his purpose, clarity about his mission in the world. Whatever happened out there in the wilderness, the end result is that Jesus has seen what God needed him to see.

A quick glimpse of religious history tells us that there is something creative, something holy, something of a birthing nature to the wilderness. All three of the enduring, monotheistic religions emerge out of the wilderness. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all trace their roots to a place of disorientation, a place where one quickly loses one's bearings, a place where reality gives way to illusion, where certainty becomes mirage, where the control freak inside of us gives way to the person who walks by faith alone.

Jesus may have been driven INTO the wilderness, but he comes OUT when he's good and ready. He comes out when he can put his hand to the plow and not look back. He comes out when he is satisfied he has seen what God needs him to see. He comes out knowing there is no turning back. The way to the cross is a one way path. For him, there shall be no turning back.

I think of the summer of 1993 when the Spirit DROVE me into the wilderness of the Appalachian Trail. I located the white blazes crossing a country road outside Blairstown, New Jersey and headed south across the Delaware Water Gap. I had no idea how long I would hike, what clarity I might find, or where I would end up. With mole skin in my pack, water purification pills in my belt, and a Visa Card in my wallet, all I knew was that a force greater than myself was DRIVING me into the wilderness.

This section of the AT is known for rocks and more rocks and many more rocks. On the night of the ninth day, I knew my time in the wilderness had come to an end. My body was physically exhausted. I barely had the strength to start a fire much less prepare a meal. Rolling out my sleeping bag, I thought I might just fall asleep and never wake up. Before the sun went down, I spied an older man walking along the trail. He had parked down below and hiked up to check on the wooden shelter. He put his walking stick aside and decided to sit a spell and to visit with the lone occupant of the lean-to.

The dean of the graduate school of Kutztown University, this older man described for me the next section of the trail, how it mounted a high peak over-looking Port Clinton, passing through tall pines, past a den where bear cubs had been spotted, and down through a valley with a rushing brook, into a town that time had forgotten. He seemed to know every step of the path. His description took on a poetic rhythm. I could see there was no place he would rather be. Then, off he went as quietly as he had come.

I spread some peanut butter on a bagel, took a long drink from my canteen, sat down by the fire, and I knew my time in that wilderness was over. I wouldn't walk that next section so meticulously described by the college dean. I didn't need to. I had seen what God needed me to see.

I had seen that being a pastor is a good thing, that being a minister in a church is a good way to use the gifts God has given me, and that being a servant leader is my calling. The Spirit that had DRIVEN me onto the AT let me come out of the woods when I was ready.

Lent is a four letter word for wilderness. Lent is that forty day stretch between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday when the Spirit says to each of us, 'Come away to a place apart and see what God needs you to see.'

Lent does not always begin on a Communion Sunday. I'm glad it does this year. I want to invite you, now, to pack an imaginary backpack for your walk towards the cross, towards the empty tomb. Think of the communion bread as your food for the journey, and the communion cup as your refreshment. Take these sacred elements with you into the forty day wilderness. Keep the aroma of the bread in your nostrils and the taste of the juice on your tongue. I can not tell you how or when or where or why, I can only invite you to allow the Spirit to DRIVE you into the wilderness where you will certainly see what God needs you to see. In the greatest of hope, Amen!