

“Wilderness Survival Guide”

Luke 4:1-13

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February 17, 2013

We last gathered for Sunday morning worship two weeks ago, and since then we have arrived in the wilderness. Every year, on the first Sunday of Lent, we read the story of Jesus's forty days alone in the desert. It sets the tone for our own forty days that lie ahead of us as we anticipate and prepare for our Easter celebrations, the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ.

This season of Lenten preparation is a quiet season. If you are not a part of a church, it can easily go by unnoticed. Unlike Easter and Christmas, Lent is not much recognized by the wider world. In fact, the biggest marker that Lent has begun outside of the church is that most fast food chains are running specials on fish sandwiches, recognizing that many Christians abstain from meat during Lent. Otherwise, you won't find Lenten greeting cards in Hallmark stores, you won't see commercials promising to enhance your prayer life, and you are more likely to know the details of your coworkers March Madness bracket than you will about what they have given up or taken on as a faith practice during Lent.

So it is very appropriate that we begin Lent each year in the desert wilderness with Jesus. It was no picnic for him. We read that he was repeatedly tempted by Satan, who tries his best to get Jesus to turn away from God. It shows us that even Jesus, who is the strongest one and the most faithful one, struggles. This becomes a model for the season of Lent, when we are asked to

first step away from our comfort zone and our routines, and we are then asked to really wrestle with our faith. We are invited to approach Easter morning stronger than we were forty days before, ready to experience the Resurrection with our hearts and our whole selves.

The story of Jesus' time in the wilderness is a challenge to all of us to find our way to our own spiritual wilderness. Lucky for us, this is a metaphor. Unlike Jesus, we don't literally have to go into the wilderness and wrestle with Satan. But even as a metaphor, Lent can feel difficult. We are called to step back from the demands and the temptations of the world. We are called to find ways to examine ourselves from inside instead of holding ourselves up in comparison with others. We are called to wrestle with our own demons.

Lent offers us the opportunity to enter our own wilderness. When I think of going into the wilderness I think of all the things I need to take with me to survive, to make sure I make it back out alive. In the wilderness I might need a tent and a sleeping bag and a fishing pole. In the spiritual wilderness, I don't want to come empty handed or unprepared. As we head into the wilderness for the next forty days, the most important thing we are going to need is a survival guide. When I am trying something new, I use a guide to help me navigate. From literal navigation using a map in a road atlas as our guide to get from here to there to guides that help us assemble furniture, raise children, grow gardens, learn math, cook food, or help us find the perfect college. Guidebooks are essential for navigating life. And so, a guidebook is going to be necessary as we enter this Lenten wilderness.

Luckily, we already have one. If you were going to guess what our survival guide is, what would you say? (*The Bible!*) It contains hundreds of stories full of people grappling with their faith and deepening their relationships with God. It's a bit big, though, so I thought it would

be helpful to have a Cliff Notes version, with special attention to the stuff that will help us through the next forty days. The Wilderness Survival Guide contains three sections. They are called: God, Neighbor, and Self.

The God section comes first, because in many ways, Lent is our opportunity to *get right with God*. We are invited to move God from the background of our minds to the foreground of our lives. Worship is our weekly time with God, and we make a few changes during Lent that get us out of automatic mode and help us pay closer attention to our conversation with God. This includes our weekly Prayer of Confession.

I have grown to love confession. It's hard to admit the ways I am not perfect or the things I have messed up on in the past week, but it's also a relief to know that when I confess these things, 1. God already knows and 2. God still loves me, imperfections and all. It's a nice reminder, and during Lent it is especially meaningful to have more opportunities to talk to God and say, "This is who I am. And sometimes I miss the mark. Are you still rooting for me, God? Yes? WHEW!" You can hear the WHEW in the amen. We don't confess to fill ourselves with shame and guilt, but we confess to shed those feelings and to begin anew. Confession is a practice that requires honesty and humility.

Even beyond confession, when we are in the wilderness, our survival guide reminds us that God is listening and is ever present in our lives. Have you seen that bumper sticker slogan that says, "If you feel far from God, guess who moved?" Well, our Lenten wilderness journey is an opportunity to move closer to God. With God as our focus, we will surely make it through.

If we are going to survive the wilderness, after God, our survival guide tells us that we need our neighbors. We all are connected to one another. The wooden chain links on our alter

table this morning are the symbol of this. Rev. Allen shared the story of the wooden chain links on Ash Wednesday, but I am going to retell it, as best I can, for all of us who were not able to be at the service. About twenty years ago, there was a gentlemen name Gennadiy Samsonenko who moved from his homeland in Russia to Glastonbury. He began settling in and found a job down at Gardiner's Market. Across the street there used to be an artists studio, I think it's a lawyer's office now, and Gennadiy asked the artist if he could eat his lunch outside the building, next to the creek. He said yes, and sometimes they would eat together. They struck up a sort of a friendship, and eventually, thanks to the artist, Gennadiy found his way to South Church.

Just like many people before him and many people since, he liked what he found at South Church, and he kept coming back. When he left his home in Russia, he had been given these wooden chain links by his father. His father had carved them, by hand, from a single piece of wood. He told his son that when he found his spiritual home, he should present them with these chains as a gift. He told him that they are a reminder that we may be different, but we all come from the same source, and we are all in this together. Gennadiy gave them to South Church, because we had become his spiritual home.

These chain links will remain on our altar throughout the rest of Lent, the visible symbol that we are all in this together. We need each other. Despite all of our differences of opinions and backgrounds and personalities, we share a common faith. We are disciples of Christ, and we are here, practicing a faith that is often unpopular, overlooked and minimized by the world around us. We need each other to come back to every week as a reminder that our faith is found in our community.

Like the wooden links, even though we come from the same piece of wood and are connected to each other. We are still individuals, each on our own journey, which is why the last section of the wilderness survival book involves self. If this were an actual survival book, you would turn the page to the “Self” section, and encounter a blank page. Most of us would probably pause at this point, wondering if something is missing, not quite realizing we are expected to add to the book ourselves. This is where Lent gets really good, and feels different from the rest of the year. This wilderness journey is yours to make your own. Lent contains both the responsibility and the reward of shaping it to best fit your needs, in service to God, and with the support of your neighbors.

In our tradition, there is not one way to observe Lent. Typically, Christians have chosen to spend Lent abstaining from something in their life that gets in the way of their discipleship, or taking on a spiritual practice that will strengthen their relationship with God. It's a personal decision to choose something and to live it out for these forty days. When we give up something, it is so that in its absence we are reminded of the things we need versus the desires we have. It is a way to refocus on God in ways that may feel unexpected or where we have taken for granted. However, I will not dictate that you give up sweets or meat or television, and no one will tell you to pray three times a day or give all your money away.

This Lent, I would invite you to really look for a way to go deeper in your relationship with God or in the way you live out your faith in the world. It is going to be so different for every individual that it is hard to even name examples of what that might be for you. I was recently inspired by a book that Rev. MaryAnn McKibben-Dana wrote called *Sabbath In the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time*. I've been recommending this book to everyone.

Rev. Dana and her husband are working parents with three young children. Their regular busy lives got more and more busy as their kids got older and there were more activities and more friends.

Somehow, after a few fits and starts, and against all odds, they began practicing Sabbath one day a week as a family for an entire year. She writes about their Sabbath practice with deep honesty, and humor, and love for her family and for God. For them, Sabbath became a time when they stopped doing chores, no matter how messy the house was. They went places as a family, but nowhere that required them to have a strict schedule or stay for a certain amount of time. On Sabbath, they tried to refrain from saying, “Hurry up, we need to leave” or “We don't have time for that!” For their family, Sabbath became about slowing down, flexibility, and listening to each other's needs. Even as someone who doesn't have kids of my own, this family's story really resonated with me. I felt for their struggle in both carving out the time for this spiritual practice, and justifying it to their friends and family who didn't quite understand what they were doing. Rev. Dana does a great job of affirming that while Sabbath became important to her family, the way they do it is unique to them, and might look different for everyone.

I was so inspired that I'm attempting to create Sabbath each week during Lent for myself, but it looks a lot different than her family. Her story is one example of making the bold choice to strengthen your faith life, and demonstrates that there are endless ways to do this, depending on who you are and what your needs are.

Lent is an honor system between yourself and God, and the rest of us are here to support you and share together, but we cannot manage another person's wilderness journey. The “Self” section of the survival guide is for you to write. There is no wrong way to go about this. The only

disservice you do is if you don't turn to that page at all. We have forty days in the wilderness. Forty days to focus on our faith, to strengthen our spirits, and to reclaim God as *Our God*. You now have your survival guide, both the extended Bible version, and the Cliff Notes edition, to take with you, but these are your forty days. How will you use them?