

A Pilgrimage in the Wilderness

First Sunday in Lent: Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-9, I Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

February 18, 2018

When we think wilderness, most of us think hunting and camping and fishing and hiking. For those who live in developed communities with manicured lawns and little time in the wild feels like a vacation. The wilderness is beautiful and fresh and healing.

But let's be honest. The wilderness we like best is a controlled wilderness. A wilderness where someone has cleared a trail or set up a deer stand or maybe even built a cabin. The uncontrolled wilderness is far more frightening.

The book of Exodus in the Bible tells us the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years before finally getting to the promised land. The wilderness made slavery in Egypt look good to them. They begged to go back.

Wilderness is what happens when chaos is not kept in check. So the story of Noah is an earlier story of wilderness, the watery kind. We really shouldn't pretend the story of Noah is for children. We make it sound like a field trip to the zoo, but this is a terrifying story. Listen to how it starts in Genesis 6 -

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

Another way to translate wickedness is violence. Sometime after Eden, God's creation turned violent and evil. The story goes on -

And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.

Do you hear that? The Lord was ready to give up. So after that, chaos took over. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. According to the story, the rains fell and flooded the earth and killed almost everything on it. Then, after forty days, the rains stopped, and the waters subsided. And the Lord started over with Noah and his children and the animals Noah saved on the ark. And from then on, God promised to be in the saving business, not the destroying business. *I will remember my*

covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Forty days on the ark for Noah. Forty years in the wilderness for the Israelites. Both times, chaos took over, but the wilderness led to something new.

Fast forward to Mark, chapter 1, the first book about Jesus. *When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.* The people reading Mark's gospel knew what that meant. This wilderness would lead to something new, too.

And it did. When the forty days were over, Jesus went throughout Galilee proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled."

Have you heard of Time's Up, the movement to end sexual harassment in the workplace? Or did you see the sign on the podium at a rally this weekend in Florida – The Time is Now?

I think Jesus meant something similar about time. Not a casual, might as well get around to it kind of time. Not even an excited this is what we have been waiting for kind of time. For Jesus, this was an urgent time. The time is fulfilled. It was time to do something. He was ready to act. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. The very next thing Jesus did was call his disciples to follow him.

One way to read the gospels, not the only way by any means, but one way to read the gospels is as a manual for social change, a how to book for making things better. Jesus and the people who followed him had had enough. The gap between the rich and the poor had grown way too wide. The poor were taxed to oblivion to fund the emperor's lavish building projects. Roman forces occupying Jerusalem and Galilee were violent and oppressive. People were starving and dying and no one seemed to be able to stop it.

And in the midst of all of this chaos, Jesus was baptized by John. He saw the heavens opened and heard who he was – God's son, the beloved. And when he came out of the wilderness he was ready. "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news." The wilderness prepared him for action.

I don't know about you, but this week has felt like a wilderness to me. Ash Wednesday is never what you'd call a fun day in the church year, but it had been somewhat amusing to think about the coincidence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. A few folks wrote some great Ash Wednesday Valentine's Day Cards. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in Jesus' love we put our trust. You are sweet, but repentance is sweeter. Hey girl, how about for Lent I give up anyone else but you? I was expecting a lighter mood on Ash Wednesday.

But the most unloving, horrifying thing happened on Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday. 17 students and teachers were murdered by a former classmate. 15 wounded. Countless traumatized. One of the murdered students was the leader of the youth group at her Episcopal church. The young man who committed the crime was a broken, tortured soul, and everyone knew it, but still he had access to guns. The school had actually prepared for an event like this. Where I grew up with tornado and fire drills, students today have lock down drills and active shooter escape routes. But nothing prevented this.

We are living in a kind of wilderness, friends – not a let's go on vacation to a little cabin in the woods kind of wilderness. Three of the ten most deadly mass shootings in modern US history have taken place in the last six months. The issue of gun safety is not the only chaos around us. We could name dozens of dilemmas where people are being harmed and something needs to change and our hands feel tied.

And adding to the chaos is the roar of the rhetorical winds that make it impossible to hear different views and work toward solutions. Those who want to have a reasonable discussion about gun safety are accused of wanting to ban all guns. And those who support and defend responsible gun ownership are accused of being mass murderers. Conversation shuts down. Nothing changes. Chaos.

But like Jesus, we have been baptized. For the baptized people of God, there is always a way through the wilderness because we trust the Spirit of God has brought us to this place and this moment. Yes, there are wild beasts all around, and they are terrifying, but there are angels, too. They speak to us in the struggle. They keep us from getting so discouraged we cannot raise our heads.

And Jesus has been here before. He gives us a three point plan through wilderness. So listen to him.

First, The time is fulfilled. The first step in making a difference is taking a first step. When you feel that voice in you saying – that's it, something has to change, whatever the issue is, pay attention to it. That may be the voice of Jesus calling you to action. Maybe it is a conversation you need to have to broaden your perspective. Maybe it is an issue you need to speak to in some way. Maybe you need to give to a cause. When you find yourself saying, "I've had enough," don't ignore that voice. The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God has come near. The people who followed Jesus was near to hopeless. They were poor in spirit and had almost run out of energy to keep going. But Jesus said, The kingdom of God has come near. Friends, don't forget this broken, beautiful world belongs to God. It is held in God's keeping. God thinks it is worth saving. God has promised since the time of Noah

to be in the saving business, not the destroying business. God will do everything God can do to set it right. So do not give up hope. The kingdom of God has come near.

But God does most of this healing work through us. That's step 3. Repent and believe the good news. Whatever it is that keeps you from making the difference you know God wants you to make, repent of it. We confessed on Ash Wednesday our blindness to human need and suffering and our lack of concern for those who come after us. Repent of the things that hold us back and believe that God is working to make things better. Believe that nothing is ever hopeless. Believe that by working with others with the help of God you can be the change you wish to see. Repent and believe the good news.

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news. Give up chocolate if you want to, but this is the real work of Lent. Amen.

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