“Wilderness”

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Mark 1:9-15

March 1, 2020 - First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” 12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent. Some of you gathered in the prayer chapel at 1:00 and others here in the sanctuary at 7:00 to begin 40 days of penitence and reflection. Some of you will participate in our Lenten small groups that begin this evening. Those small groups will use poetry from Devotions, a book of poetry by Mary Oliver, as their focus. The poem that Jody read as our Call to Worship this morning is the poem the Lenten Small Groups will focus on this week.

Some of you have committed to embracing a spiritual discipline during this Lenten season.

The usual Lenten practice is to give something up during the forty days of Lent…the thought behind doing so is that when we think about the item we’ve given up…often a particular food or drink…our commitment to not have that item then turns our hearts to reflect upon our failure to live as God commands us to live and the sacrifice Jesus Christ made on our behalf to restore the covenant with God that our sin destroys.

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on giving back rather than giving up…being involved in some act of service or love during the 40 days of Lent.

But honestly, today it’s particularly difficult for us here at PHPC to be in a reflective and penitent mood…to hide the alleluias…when all we want to do is shout alleluia from the rooftop. As you know, shortly we will hear the report of the Pastor Nominating Committee.

They have been at work for 2 years…24 months. They have met almost every Monday night of those 2 years to work together with God to discern that person to nominate to you to serve as PHPC’s next Senior Pastor and Head of Staff. Along the way, on your behalf, they have felt moments of joy and despair as they have gone through this process. And you, sitting on the sidelines so to speak, have wondered: “What’s taking so long?” “What are they doing?”

“Doesn’t anyone want to be our pastor?”

In the meantime, the members of this congregation have worked hard to ensure the worship, ministry, and mission of God in and through this church have continued. And yes, there have been times when you have felt you were in a wilderness…a wilderness of grief and uncertainty and fear as you have navigated this time of transition.

While you’re filled with anticipation and joy to hear the Pastor Nominating Committee’s report today and hearing about Jesus in the wilderness may be the last thing you want to hear today, we all know we end up in the wilderness at some point.

No one wants to be in the wilderness. Mark’s account of Jesus in the wilderness begins with:

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” v.11

Really God? The wilderness? You’ve just said of Jesus “You are my Son, the beloved” and now your Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness!?

*No one* wants to go into the wilderness. Survival in the wilderness is difficult at best. People have gone into the wilderness and not returned. You’ve heard of wilderness survival training, emphasis on the word survival. *No one* wants to go into the wilderness.

Yet, that is where the Spirit drove Jesus.

The Spirit *driving or leading* Jesus into the wilderness is not what we remember from this or the other gospel accounts of Jesus’ time in the wilderness. We may remember the temptation *occurred* in the wilderness. We may remember Jesus spent *40 days* in the wilderness. I doubt, however, many remember *it was the Spirit* who took Jesus into the wilderness.

The Greek word translated *tempted* in this passage can also be translated *tested.* During my time in seminary I experienced high test anxiety. On test days during seminary, I would wait until the last possible moment to go into the classroom and take a seat. I had quickly discovered that if I went into the classroom and sat down before the last possible moment,

I would hear my classmates discussing what might be on the test and my mind would begin to race…*I don’t remember reading about that.* *Will the professor ask that?* *What else is going to be on the test I don’t know?*  It wasn’t just my mind that was racing, my heart was racing, too. I discovered if, on test days, I timed my entrance into the classroom at the same time the professor walked in, I didn’t have to hear that discussion and my anxiety didn’t go through the roof.

Not many of us truly enjoy sitting down and regurgitating what we have learned whether that is by filling in the blank, choosing the right answer among a listing of several answers, writing the answer to a question, or calculating the answer.

So, the idea that God not only drove Jesus into the wilderness, but also allowed Jesus to be tested there can be a hard pill to swallow. No one wants to go into the wilderness. It is a hard and often dangerous place.

But the wilderness is where we sometimes find ourselves. Today marks the beginning of the end of PHPC’s time of transition wilderness and again, although the Lenten practice is to not use the word “Alleluia” in worship, we sure would like to do so today! However, although you are filled with joy and anticipation to hear the PNC’s report, you may be in a time of wilderness in your own life. Addiction to prescription drugs or alcohol is ruining your life and the lives of those you love. You are being bullied or inappropriately harassed by someone, but you don’t tell anyone for fear of reprisal to you or someone you love. You are struggling with an illness or health professionals are struggling to find out the cause of your symptoms. A relationship in your life has fallen apart. We all have wilderness moments. No one wants to be in the wilderness.

*Yet*, God drove Jesus *into the* *wilderness* and allowed the devil to tempt Jesus for 40 days. God allows wilderness times to be a part of our lives.

But, Jesus was not alone in the wilderness. The same Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness stayed with Jesus in that wilderness. The same Spirit that called Dave Fry into retirement causing a wilderness of sorts for this church, is the same Spirit who has been with you through these years of transition. That same Spirit is with you in the wilderness times of your life, whatever the cause of that wilderness may be.

**We** are not alone in the wilderness times of our lives. The same Spirit who was with Jesus has accompanied this church during this time of transition. The same Spirit who was with Jesus accompanies each of us during our times of testing…our journeys in the wilderness.

I can’t tell you how God will be with you in your wilderness. To do so implies that I know the mind of God. But I do know what God is…God is love. Jesus knew that even while he was in the wilderness, the God of love was with him and would…and did…give him what he needed to survive that wilderness.

God has also given this church…through the efforts of many of you sitting in this congregation today…through the efforts of the staff…through the efforts of some beyond these walls…what it has needed to survive the wilderness of transition.

Whenever we find ourselves in the wilderness, stumbling around hungry and thirsty, not knowing which way to turn or where to go and what to do, think of when Jesus was driven into the wilderness. As he, Jesus, walked the route through Jerusalem…what has been called the Via Delarosa…carrying a cross strapped to his exhausted and bleeding and broken body, he knew that God who *gives* us life is the One who *accompanies* us through this life and *into* life eternal with God.

Yes, today of all days, we here at PHPC do not want to think about wilderness. We just want to languish in the fact that this church’s wilderness time is ending. But, in the background, the Lenten season is playing out and we need to reflect on what Jesus was preparing himself for 2,000 years ago, even as we celebrate together as a congregation today.

So let’s celebrate today. Let’s praise God for the way God has and will continue to be with this church and with each of us. Let us also, even in our celebration…never lose sight of the fact that we are in relationship with the Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter of all creation because that same One became like us, but without sin…and accompanies us through our wilderness moments, our mountaintop moments, and all the other moments of our lives. Amen.