

Lent 1 B
February 18, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

A few years back I was invited to offer a one-day retreat on the theme of wilderness for people in a sabbatical program at Gonzaga University. One of the first things the participants did that day was select a color photo from among dozens of pictures of wilderness scenes. They then spent an hour or so of quiet time pondering what wilderness meant for them, both in the nature scene they selected and beyond.

Some of the pictures were desert scenes or lonely trails. Others were deep forests, or ice fields, steep rock faces or stark canyons.

I asked the people not to select a picture simply because it was beautiful, but rather to take one that they thought would be a challenging place for them to be. That is different for everyone. As someone who grew up in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, a desert is more challenging for me. But for my daughters, who grew up in the desert of the lower Columbia Basin, a deep forest would be more daunting. They really didn't like camping in the woods.

Wilderness is at the center of today's gospel reading as we begin our journey through Lent. A wilderness experience for Jesus, who Mark tells us was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit after his baptism. This is a very spare wilderness story – only two sentences: "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."

That's all Mark needs to tell that part of the story. That's all Mark needs to remind us that Jesus, in his humanity, struggled as we struggle. Experienced wilderness in a way that tested him.

Luke and Matthew expand that story quite a bit to include conversations with the devil and some tantalizing temptations: make stones become bread; leap from the pinnacle of the temple; worship the devil and possess the kingdoms of the world. None of that is there in Mark. Just those two simple sentences.

Wilderness can be a place of temptation – for Jesus or for us. It is a place where we feel vulnerable – exposed in ways we are not normally exposed. Most of us have at least a little experience in the wilderness of nature – perhaps on a hiking trip or a journey through some desert or forest. Maybe we've been lost or stranded – exposed to the elements or living without the security and comfort that we would normally enjoy. Wilderness is not always a safe or welcoming place.

If you have ever visited the Holy Land as a pilgrim or tourist, there is good chance a guide took you to a place that at least suggests the site of today's gospel. In my case it was down a lonely road into a desert place – windswept, sandy and exposed to the blazing sun. It's easy to engage your imagination and envision a wilderness struggle as you stand in that place.

But wilderness, in the biblical sense (and in our own lives) is not just about geography. It is often more about our inner life. Theologian Ronald Rolheiser says the desert (or the wilderness) is more a place in the heart than a place on the map. Before you are ready to receive life, you have to be readied by facing down your own demons. This means going into

the desert (at least metaphorically) and entering that place where you are most frightened, lonely and threatened.

Rolheiser says the wilderness empties us. It shapes us and calls forth our courage. It transforms us through God's effort, not our own. God is doing the work. But we are there, too – on the journey.

But that place of wilderness can look very different for us, depending on who we are. A few weeks ago the magazine *Christian Century* invited readers to submit brief essays on the theme of wilderness. They were fascinating to read. Some were great challenges, others had healing and holy moments

One was about growing up with a violent, substance abusing parent and eventually leaving that home and taking solace in St. Paul's words, "If God be for us, who can be against us?". Another was from a single person who belonged to a church that focused its ministry only on couples and families. She couldn't find her place there. A pastor who experienced the wilderness of a terrible emptiness during Lent volunteered to celebrate an Easter service in a prison -- a different kind of wilderness. Daunting as it was, she discovered she was standing on what she called "holy linoleum" during communion in a prison classroom.

There are profound places of wilderness that we experience in life. A school shooting an – as we experienced this week in Florida or last fall closer to home at Freeman High school, leaves us feeling exposed, grieved, afraid for our children. The reality of a school shooting is probably closer to pure hell than to wilderness.

The wilderness comes in its aftermath. What are we to do? Thoughts are prayers are good things to do, but the challenge is to find a place in this wilderness to act. To summon

courage. The temptation is to do nothing. To direct our prayers only to comfort, but not to gather strength to address the underlying violence in our culture.

Another kind of more personal wilderness can come from difficult and scary medical issues where we feel lost in a place of tests, procedures, and prognoses. Lost in a sea of sometimes difficult decisions.

And there are more every-day places of wilderness. For those chronically busy and active people like me, it could be a place or time of simply holding still. It might be fighting off the temptation to fill every date on the calendar. It might look like making more space for God and being open to the transformation God has in mind.

For those who struggle with generosity, it might look like being stretched and challenged to share more – more time, more resources. For the angry and alienated, it might be a place where reconciliation and peace are the main event. For the disengaged, it might look like the call to more attentiveness to what is going on around us and spotting those opportunities to engage and serve others.

The temptations are always there, no matter what the wilderness. Temptations to return to a more comfortable place and leave behind the opportunity to grow. The temptation to rationalize hanging on to something we are challenged to relinquish.

The wilderness journey of Lent is opportunity. An opportunity to see where we might be led. What we might discover about ourselves and our God. Where we might be led to change.

Mark tells us that Jesus was with the wild beasts in the wilderness and that angels waited on him. The wild beasts in this passage suggest the danger, the liminality of the wilderness. But the Angels suggest God's presence and protection. It sounds a lot like Psalm 91

where the righteous person will be protected by angels and safe from attacks of wild beasts and reptiles. Protected from the lion and adder.

The wilderness can be a risky place, but the good news is ---We are not alone. The wilderness may feel like utter solitude, but God is our companion.

The wise words of Frederick Buechner pull this together well, I think, as he writes in *Listening to Your Life*: "... the promise [of God] is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us – loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us. He has been in the wilderness for us... And rise we shall, out of the wilderness, every last one of us, even as out of the wilderness Christ rose before us."

May it be so. Amen