

Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

Psalm 25:1-9

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Making Our Way through the Wilderness

If you have spent any time in the high desert of northern New Mexico you would experience wilderness in a most primal and visceral way. It is incredibly austere with very little scrubby vegetation among the red, dusty rocks and steep canyons. The sun is intense due to the high altitude and the temperature at midday is already hot with very few places that can offer shade. At night you are chilled by the frigid night air no matter how many layers of clothing you pile on. In the vastness of this open space you sense how immense it all seems and how incredibly small, insignificant and vulnerable you feel in comparison, especially when you hear the eerie howling of coyotes off in the distance. (you pray they are at a **great** distance!)

The wilderness can be a dangerous place; a place we choose not to go. It is a place that is alien and filled with all sorts of unknown things. It is a place where we come face to face with our unspoken fears, our shame, inadequacies, and failures – all those things we just as soon not think about let alone share with anyone else. It is a place that forces us to wrestle with our demons and acknowledge our need for God.

I wonder if Jesus felt this way when the Spirit led him into the desert after his baptism. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark's gospel gives very few details of Jesus' experience of his forty days in the wilderness.¹ Was he frightened or confused? Was he cold at night? How did he pass the time? Did he pray aloud to God? What exactly did the angels do as they waited on him? Was he homesick for his family and friends? Was he angry at the Spirit for having led him into this strange and dangerous place? After all Jesus was assured that he was God's beloved with whom we was well pleased. As the days stretched into weeks, did Jesus begin to doubt his "belovedness" as God's only Son?² Being fully human I imagine Jesus experienced all these emotions and much more. Because Jesus survived forty days and nights in the wilderness we can take great comfort in knowing that he understands how difficult it is for us when we find ourselves in the wilderness of our lives.

Wilderness can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Losing a job and wondering how in the world we are going to manage. Facing the challenges of aging and realizing

¹ Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1660>, last accessed on Feb. 17, 2018.

² Thomas.

our bodies aren't capable of doing what they once were. Dealing with a devastating diagnosis with few, if any, options for treatment; or having a child bullied at school or on social media; or wrestling with an addiction or mental illness that seems to be winning the battle no matter how hard we struggle. Human suffering is part of life in our broken world. There is no way to escape it. Without any warning, we may find ourselves in the midst of a wilderness and we haven't the faintest idea of what to do.

This harsh reality was brought home this past week when 17 teenagers were gunned down in their high school in Parkland, FL. Loss of young innocent lives in such a savage way deeply and irrevocably wounds our soul both as individuals as well as a nation. Part of the tragedy is that it shatters our sense of security and confidence in each other and our institutions. Nowhere feels safe. This shooting and all those that have occurred in the past forces each of us to truthfully examine who we are and what matters most in our lives. And, the hardest question we wrestle with is whether our actions, our choices, reflect our core values, the very essence of who we are as followers of Jesus.

We have a choice in how we respond to this tragedy and any tragedy as we find our way through this wilderness of death, grief and heartbreak. We are outraged whenever and wherever innocent lives are snuffed out, destroying families and causing untold suffering for so many. Yet, like Jesus, we must not forget that we are God's beloved, even when we struggle and stumble around in the wilderness, we still belong to God. This is where we find our strength and our resolve to resist falling into despair and becoming cynical during these challenging times. As Christians we look to how Jesus lived his life to sustain us and direct us, which is reflected in our baptismal covenant:

We vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

These and Scripture are part of our touchstones that help us navigate our way through the wilderness, whatever that might be. It has the potential to become a place of transformation. Our struggles can shape and hone our faith into a firm foundation that is anchored in the redemptive power of God's love. Nothing is beyond this divine love. It becomes the deep wellspring of hope that with God all things are possible, even when it seems impossible.

It gives us the strength to ask the hard questions of how we move forward together through the wilderness. We place our faith in the power of God's love because this is what Jesus taught us and it is how he lived after he left the wilderness, showing us time and time again that "perfect love casts out all fear" 1 John 4:18.

Psalm 121

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

This is where we find our strength and courage as we make our through the wilderness.

Amen.