

In the wilderness

Lent is a season of forty weekdays, plus six Sundays, from Ash Wednesday to Easter. Forty is a number we find a lot in the scriptures: forty days of rain for the flood, Israel wandering for forty years in the desert, Moses spending forty days with God on Mount Sinai. Whenever the Bible uses the number forty, it is indicating a long time. Lent is a long season, giving us time and space to slow down, and reflect, and allow God a little more room to speak to us. It is meant to be a journey of prayer and devotion and turning again toward God. Psalm 25 offers us a good place to begin on this first Sunday in Lent: "Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths, lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation."

How do you prepare for such a season? What do you take with you for such a long and important journey?

For me, and perhaps for some of you, I become a bit anxious when preparing for a trip. I typically create a checklist to make sure I remember what I need to do and everything I will need to pack. What shoes will I need for all the activities we are planning? Will I need something dressier for the dinner we are going to with friends? How many shirts? What jackets or coats will I need if the weather turns rainy or cold? What if the weather turns hot? What size carry-on bag should I take on a plane? Is there a different size limit for international travel? How many three-ounce containers can I take in a plastic bag? We don't want to over-pack, because then there will be more to carry, and we will pay extra if our luggage is too heavy. But we don't want to under-pack either because we want to have enough of everything.

I always find it interesting to see the luggage that people take when traveling. Even when going to the same place, there are some folks who take several enormous pieces of luggage, including the maximum size allowed for carry-on, while some people bring a single bag. I then look at my own luggage and think, "Did I pack too light? Am I bringing too much?"

Mark writes in those days Jesus made the journey to come from Nazareth of Galilee to the Jordan River where he was baptized by John. At his baptism the heavens were torn apart, the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and a voice came from heaven

declaring, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Immediately after this the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where he would stay for a long time. Forty days in the wilderness to fast, and pray, and be tempted by Satan.

The wilderness. Each of us probably has our own image of what the wilderness is like – maybe the mountains, or desert, or some other vast, open area of nature stretching out for miles. Our word wilderness comes from old English word wildoren, which means literally, place of the wild beasts. The gospels of Matthew and Luke describe the temptations of Jesus with much more detail: Satan talking with Jesus, tempting him to turn stones into bread, standing on the pinnacle of the temple. Mark’s account of Jesus’ wilderness experience is very concise: Jesus was in the wilderness; he was with the wild beasts – all the difficult and dangerous things one encounters in the wilderness – and the angels ministered to him.

The wilderness has always been part of the story of the people of Israel. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us of Israel wandering in the wilderness forty years before reaching the promised land. It was in the wilderness that they received the commandments of God through Moses. Isaiah spoke of a voice crying out in the wilderness, and John the Baptist saw himself as a voice doing just that.

The wilderness is where Jesus would also spend time, to learn, and be tested, and to hear what God was saying to him. It seems that for the people of God, individually, and sometimes as a community, there are going to be times in the wilderness. In many ways the COVID pandemic was a wilderness time for us. In the wilderness many of the usual comforts are gone. Many of the daily patterns are disrupted and changed. The wilderness is a stripped-down place. We learn what is essential and what is not. It can be a place where we have more quiet and more space to listen to what God is saying to us, a place where we can encounter a deeper truth, or uncover a stronger faith.

So, Jesus needed time in the wilderness. With the wild beasts and angels: those forces around us that can threaten us and harm us, and those that can help us. Times when we are tempted either to choose God, or not. Times like that help a person discover who they truly are. A wilderness time can reveal what is inside a person. That is how it was for the people of Israel during those forty years. The gospels tell us that is how it was for Jesus. Following his baptism, the wilderness helped Jesus learn more about who he was, and who God was. These forty days prepared Jesus for the journey God was calling him to, his ministry of teaching and healing, and

offering himself to the whole world. Immediately after his time in the wilderness, Jesus' ministry began. He was ready. He knew who he was and who he was called to be. From the wilderness, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, announcing the coming of God's kingdom.

Wilderness times are important for our spiritual journey. That is why we are encouraged to set time apart each day for prayer, why God commanded we observe one day in seven as a Sabbath. That is why some people go on retreat from time to time. It is why the Church, in her wisdom, has set aside this season of Lent, our own forty-day time in the wilderness, every single year, in preparation for Easter. What did Jesus take with him when he began his journey? What did he pack for the long trip from his home in Nazareth to go down to the Jordan River to encounter John the Baptist? What did he do when his original travel plans were extended for another forty days, in a place he wasn't expecting to go?

Any of us would want to make sure that we had adequate provisions for a trip of forty days or more. If we were going into the wilderness, we would want to pack shelter, clothes, food, water, and whatever supplies we might need.

But in the Bible, people enter the wilderness with very little. Israel didn't pack forty years' worth of supplies when they walked out of Egypt after being set free. And the gospels don't indicate that Jesus took anything at all for his long journey. The Spirit drove him out, just as he was. And that was enough.

Later, when Jesus called the fishermen to come and follow him, they followed this same pattern; they dropped everything they had and followed, not knowing what might lay ahead. Later in his public ministry, when Jesus sent the disciples out to proclaim the kingdom of God, and teach and heal, he told them not to take extra sandals or clothing. "Just go," he said. "Trust that you have everything you need."

Like Jesus, we are called by God, named as God's own in our baptism, and every once in a while, the Spirit may invite us into a kind of wilderness. This is a place where we might be strengthened, and challenged, and where we can better discern God's desire for our lives. Our wilderness time, like that of Jesus, may bring its own share of wild beasts, and angels. And both can have something to teach us.

As you and I make our journey through Lent, as we spend time in this forty-day wilderness that God is calling us into, we may wonder how we are to prepare, and what we are to take for our journey. Don't give into the temptation that you need to pack more and more. Don't think that you need to read two more books on prayer or spirituality. Don't tell yourself that you aren't prepared to follow Jesus until you attend another conference or watch another video.

Those things can be fine, and even helpful. But the scriptures remind us God doesn't ask us to bring anything other than ourselves. Just as we are. There is a good reason why the Church, for centuries, has invited people to give up something for Lent. The whole idea of walking into the wilderness where God leads us is about letting go, and letting go, and letting go. Let go of all the things we usually think we need, so that we can follow where the Spirit is leading us, where there is God, and you, and perhaps a few beasts and angels.

The good news is that you and I are prepared enough, this very day, to begin again our walk with God. Even as you walk out of church this morning. Even as you come up to receive communion. Our baptism proclaims that like Jesus, we are God's beloved children, ready for the wilderness, and surrounded by God's angels. You and I have what we need for the journey God calls us to. Like Jesus, we called right where we are. And that will be enough.

Know that the One who calls you is the One who travels with you. May God give us a Holy Season of Lent and bless us on our journey. Amen.

Trace Browning

Year B – First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9:8-17 • Psalm 25 • 1 Peter 3:18-22 • Mark 1:9-13

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