

Sermon for August 1, 2021  
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### Finding the Sacred in the Wilderness

Every year during the season of Lent, we spend time in the wilderness. We recall the story of Jesus being tested there and Israel's 40 years of wandering. During this time, our liturgy and music has a simplicity and sparseness, as if to reflect the desert landscape.

We do this in Lent, when we're being penitential and reflective getting ready for Easter. Yet, this morning our lesson, psalm and gospel all take us to the wilderness. As I was preparing a few weeks ago, I thought, "what is all this Lenten stuff doing here right now?" It's summer, can't we get something light? The poolside magazine version of the Bible: "10 hot tips to strengthen your faith." Not really, but kind of. Especially after all that we've been through. Who isn't ready for a break? But as the last week or so has unfolded, the assigned readings for today are more than fitting.

We know the struggle of certain Covid precautions going back into effect or trying to plan for the fall, once again not knowing what to expect. In the Olympics, we've seen the athletes struggling with the added pressures of their set up and not having family. For frontline workers who never really saw things ease up, many are feeling like they just can't do it any more, and hospitals are struggling to stay staffed.

It's like we got a little glimpse of the Promised Land, and yet we're finding that the wilderness isn't done with us yet. So how do we think about this time?

So often the wilderness it's associated with what is hard: It is a time of struggle. Emptiness. Dryness. In *Godly Play* we say it's a place that you don't go into unless you have to. And that's true. We don't choose to go into the metaphorical wildernesses of life.

However, if we look at the stories of the wilderness in scripture, we can see that they are more than just hardship. They are more than just struggle. And what can come out of them can be a blessing that comes in equal measure to the difficulty.

In the wilderness, we can find the sacred in the struggle, because it's a place of divine encounter. Like if we look at our reading today from Exodus, the people of Israel are wishing they were not in the wilderness. Wishing that they were back in Egypt with the fleshpots. But in their lack, their state of need, and in the not having it all, they have this profound experience where God provides for them. In the story, bread rains from the heavens. It's a delightful image, though one that may be hard to imagine happening for us. But we can imagine what it's like to experience need and then somehow, remarkably and unexpectedly, the thing we need shows up from a friend or even a stranger. Who's to say that isn't God? Something larger than us at work.

We can also find the sacred in the wilderness because when the distractions are stripped away, when we can't lean on things like success or self sufficiency, when we are not in control and orchestrating things to go our way there is a freed up space and energy to meet God. Like Jesus in the wilderness, it says he was driven out to the wilderness, and fasted for 40 days and was tempted. Prior to that not much was known about him, but he comes out having this dynamic relationship with God. He learns to look to God in all things and be in constant

Communion with God. Because of this, he comes out speaking with authority against oppression and empowering people to forgive and be forgiven and he heals people. As our John reading says, he becomes the bread. The nourishment and satisfaction for a starving world. What would've happened if Jesus didn't have his wilderness experience?

Finally, we can find the sacred in the wilderness because it's a place of transformation. Like Jesus, or like Jacob when he wrestled with God, in the struggle something changes us. We learn things about ourselves that we wouldn't if all was going well. It deepens us as people if we are open to what the wilderness has to teach us. It increases the well we have within us to draw on for others. Some of our greatest strengths are what have developed in hard times.

We tend to look at the wilderness as all bad. But the wilderness is never just one thing. It's a place of struggle AND the sacred. In this desolate place, some of the most beautiful and life giving and life saving things can spring forth. And make no mistake, you can still celebrate in the wilderness. You can still laugh and love and lend a hand and have an array of life experiences. Even in this setting and season of life.

But the thing about the wilderness -- the thing I believe Jesus had to get to and the people of Israel and we have to get to -- is making peace with it. Because when we make peace with it or that sense of "yes, this is where we are," and when we stop denying it or wrestling against it, then we can begin to see God in it. Then we can begin to receive its lessons. Then we can let the deep work happen.

This last week we got a stunning, heartbreaking and world changing demonstration of what that looks like when Simone Biles chose not to compete in her Olympic events. Even as things have gotten better, there's still immense stigma around mental health and admitting when one's struggling. So for her to come forward in this way when the world spotlight was on her, was so courageous. And what an example it was for others.

It showed people, especially kids and youth who look up to her, that they can do the same in their wilderness times. That it's okay not to be okay — and you don't have to struggle alone in secret. Every day she was out there with her teammates. Not competing but part of the team. And what she did conveys that our worth is more important than our success and achievement. She even said that in an interview -- that she never really knew her worth outside of her accomplishments until now. That is deep growth and transformation that can't be taken away. What she did this last week was a greater accomplishment than all the medals could be.

When we find ourselves in the wildernesses of life, can we make peace with it? Can we accept it? And approach it with humility and grace and learn its lessons? Can we appreciate the wilderness' paradox? That it's not just one thing. That even in the desert you can dance, look up at a star filled sky and find the sacred in the struggle.

There may be a little more time in the wilderness. May we experience its blessing.