

**“God is in the Wilderness”  
The First Sunday in Lent - Feb 21, 2021 - Mark 1:9-18/B**

You probably know that I love Lent: the time to reflect and connect with people on what seems to be a deeper level, the quiet, the rituals, the vespers, even the disciplines that make me exercise my faith muscles. But honestly, this year, I’m *not* in love with Lent. For folks who say, “Oooo, I hate Lent – it’s so *depressing!*” (Lord knows we’ve got enough to be depressed about...) I. Hear. You. In fact, at our clergy text study we actually talked about skipping Lent altogether, since we seem to have been doing it for a year already!

So, today, I thought I would change things up a bit. First, we’ll look at Jesus “temptation” in the wilderness – then, rather than talking about how it is not necessarily a model of how God deals with *us*, let’s just spend some time out there with him...in the wilderness...where generations of people have gone to be with God.

Jesus first came to the wilderness to see his kinsman John, and to get baptized. But the strangest thing happened as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan River. He heard his Father’s voice. Yep, Jesus heard God speak directly to him – and whether others heard it or not – hearing the voice of the One who created you from the first is a special moment. Any of us who have lost our parents, or others who we deeply loved, know the yearning to hear their voices. So, you can imagine what this meant to Jesus. Not only did God settle any and all questions of paternity, and claim Jesus as “*Son*”, he also got to hear his Father say out loud, “*I love you.*” Then, words of affirmation. God said, “*with you I am well pleased.*” **Wow.** Right before Jesus set out for his first day of work – on his own - his Dad told him he was proud of him.

Immediately, the Holy Spirit drives him out into the wilderness (and what? “drops him off?”) The Greek word is “*ek ballō*” literally, “impelled him to go out” – its’ the same word used when Jesus compels demons or evil spirits – “throws them out,” from one place to another place that they usually do not wish to go: a void, a herd of swine, a wilderness. Once delivered, Jesus meets the Adversary that he will confront for the rest of his life in the people who came to him hoping to be healed, or freed, or forgiven. And in the end, **angels** (messengers from the Father God) came to tend him, preparing him to return to the Galilee and proclaim good news about the kingdom of God, who loves us all, as Jesus had just experienced for himself.

**Great story.** Now, let me go back further in time to another *ek ballō* (throwing out) story: Did you ever think about what it must have been like for the people of Israel to wander around in the wilderness of the Sinai desert for FORTY years? Were THEY driven out there by the Holy Spirit? Had God “thrown them out” into the wilderness to test and tempt them as well?

Let’s review their encounter with God in the wilderness. First, they had been aliens in Egypt, immigrants, settled when Joseph was with the Pharaoh and moved his whole family from the old country. By the beginning of the book of Exodus, they’ve grown in number, and become a threat – so they were enslaved and were denied their faith practices, including worship. So, they complained to God. God heard their cries and called Moses out, who found ways to complain to Pharaoh for them, *Let us go into the desert and worship our God!*

You know how that story unfolded: *“Let my people go!”* Nope. Plagues. Passover. Escape. God used Moses to get the People of Israel thrown out of Egypt. Only to confront The Red Sea. But the Sea was miraculously parted, and the Children of Israel were led out on dry land while Pharaoh’s army was drowned as they pursued them.

There they were, safe in the wilderness. (Yay?) For generations, even to this day, Jews and other children of faith in the One God point to **that** moment, when God *“brought us out of slavery in the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”* It was the turning point - the ek balloe - when God threw them out of Egypt and moved them from one place to another. And they *still* sing the story, they celebrate God’s faithfulness, they ritualize it by never forgetting what God had done for their people (and ours as well!)

*When our water was bitter and we could not drink – you sweetened it. When our food ran out and we hungered – you rained bread from heaven. When we were lost – you showed us the way to follow - a pillar of cloud by day; a pillar of fire to light up the night. When we began to feel the boredom and weariness of “together” - you gave us rules to live by. Then it happened again. We complained. And centuries of those who wish to go back to the way things were, still petition their own “back to Egypt Committee” who complain for us, reminding us of the good life of the past. (slavery in Egypt?)*

Here’s where our story begins to parallel theirs: God brought us out to worship in the desert, gave us plans for a tabernacle to travel with us and be where we were, so we could worship as we made our way to the Promised Land. Then we complained again, as we were poised to enter the land, because the residents seemed so big, and daunting, and except for a few we ran back to comfort – to the wilderness we had almost left (and yet the place where God is.) But, the land of milk and honey was indeed our land. You gave each tribe a spot of their own, and the land was ours to occupy. We were finally home in a new land, a new world.

For us, this pandemic edition of a Lenten journey continues, as we find ourselves at the edge of the Promised Land. Our desires, our stubbornness, our fears may have kept us from entering fully into what God had promised us a bit sooner, and yet, the wilderness continues to be where God meets us in a whole new way - through a unique experience of “ek balloe.” During all those years in Egypt – the Children of Israel had forgotten the God of their ancestors. And so, they had to let God teach them again. In the wilderness.

“God is in the Wilderness” is a theme we will be exploring for not only in our worship, but also in small gatherings to connect and re-connect us again via Zoom meetings, conference calls or other virtual means. Council Members will host and facilitate the first round of gatherings, called Connection Circles. Then, we hope you might host one – inviting folks you know to spend an hour talking about your wilderness wanderings since Lent 2020. You’ll hear much more about the Connection Circles in weekly emails, but if you’re interested now, simply let the office know, and we’ll get you connected with resources and people.

You, too, may feel that we have been in captivity – enslaved as it were – by things out of our control. You may be praying for the One who comes to set us free and lead us out of Egypt, through the waters, and into the Promised Land. But just as we cannot reach Easter without living through Good Friday, we cannot enter the promised land without some wandering in the wilderness.

But don't worry. Remember that God is in the wilderness! And God has been with us every hour of every day since last March. We have been journeying together – whether we touched each other or not. We have learned to wait for our thirst to be slaked and our hunger to be nourished. We have depended on pillars of smoke and fire to guide our way through unfamiliar territory. We have seen giants and mountains that made us run away and hide (if only for a while) and we have turned away from new possibilities only to find that the road behind was just as wild as is this current wilderness.

But God beckons us through this desert to the land ahead. God has a place for us – a home that we never knew we had – and it is good - and full of laughter and joy and peace. For when we learn more about God, we learn more about each other. When we connect again with friends, acquaintances and those we have not yet met, we are drawn into a Circle of Connection - with Jesus, Light of the World at the Center. We just might discover that the Promised Land has been a part of us all along. Even in the wilderness.

As the song says, *“wherever love is, God is there, too.”* This is your word from the wilderness: an invitation to come and journey with God, wherever God is. **Amen.**

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