

Sermon For Sunday, March 5, 2017 - "Wilderness Vulnerability"

First Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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Wilderness Vulnerability

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When you think about the wilderness, what images come to mind for you? Do you picture trips to the Boundary Waters, backpacking in the mountains, African safaris? Do you see the wilderness as an inviting place, away from all the noise of our daily lives?

Or does the wilderness seem overwhelming and intimidating, a place where life is challenging? After all, there's always the threat of dangerous weather, dangerous animals and even dangerous bugs. And, there's always the chance of getting lost.

The Jewish people in Jesus' day saw the wilderness as a terrifying place. Of course, they didn't have bug spray, good footwear and Gore-Tex jackets to protect them. But more importantly, their ancient stories of times in the wilderness were stories of struggle and hardship - including forty years wandering in the desert after they left slavery in Egypt.

So when Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us about Jesus' time in the wilderness, they aren't saying Jesus had a peaceful, "let's get away from it all and enjoy the wide-open spaces" moment. They're saying he spent forty days in a dry, barren, foreboding space. Jesus endured the kind of wilderness experience that is more imposed than chosen, a kind we often do our best to avoid.

Yet all of us, personally and collectively, experience these types of wilderness times within our souls - times when we feel vulnerable, exposed, raw, at the mercy of forces beyond our control.

In our personal lives, many triggers can bring about a wilderness time - aging, transitions, loss, health issues, betrayals, to name just a few.

There are wilderness times in our collective lives as well. It seems we're in one now as we watch the brutal war in Syria rage on for years and feel powerless to help, as the world refugee crisis grows, as our climate becomes increasingly volatile, as the divisions in our nation deepen.

In times like these, it is tempting to do try to avoid the vulnerability of the wilderness experience. We're tempted, as Jesus was. Perhaps the temptations come from an actual Satan, a tempter. More likely they come from within us, but that's beside the point. When Jesus was vulnerable and famished in the wilderness, he was tempted to choose a quick fix - to just turn stones into bread.

We have all sorts of opportunities for instant gratification. In our vulnerable, wilderness times they can seem even more appealing: buy something, eat something, get away on vacation, try these five simple steps and you'll feel better. Sign an online petition or post something on Facebook and you'll change the world.

Our culture trains us to want to seek immediate solutions but that is rarely the most helpful response. We're discovering this in the White Privilege conversations that are happening in Decorah right now. They make us feel vulnerable and uncomfortable and we want to do something to make this all better. Yet a quick fix would let us skip over the internal work we need to do in the wilderness of our own psyches. Sometimes we need to be uncomfortable and unclear, so that there is more space within us for God to bring change, so that our hunger for God's guidance can grow.

In the wilderness Jesus rejected the quick fix and instead relied upon God's word. As he did, his commitment to God's ways and his trust in God deepened. The same thing can happen for us in wilderness times.

Except, notice that even as Jesus trusted God, he also didn't just take a blind leap of faith. Satan tempted Jesus to just throw himself off a high pinnacle and trust God to catch him. Jesus discerned that this was a test and remembered that scripture says, "don't put God to the test."

We often get the impression that trusting God means turning off our brains, abdicating personal responsibility and putting everything into God's hands - a leap of faith. But God gave us agency and intellect and God expects us to use them. Especially in wilderness times, personally and collectively, it isn't helpful to say, "just leave it to God."

We put God to the test if we simply pray for healing, peace, and justice and then fall back and expect God to fix everything in our lives and our world. I think we'll be in the wilderness a lot longer if we do that. We're called to look to God's word, discern God's guidance, pray and act.

Authors Shane Claiborne and Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove wrote a book called Becoming the Answer to our Prayers. They say, "Prayer is not so much about convincing God to do what we want God to do as it is about convincing ourselves to do what God wants us to do." Wilderness times can help us to become the answer to our prayers. They can give us space to listen for what God wants us to do and they can reveal how lost we get when we don't follow in God's ways.

We especially get lost if we seek to use power and control rather than follow God's way of love. This is a major temptation when we feel vulnerable. We want to go on the attack, stop our opponents, win arguments, prove others wrong - we want to put ourselves above others. Jesus also faced the temptation when he was in the wilderness. Satan showed him all the kingdoms of the world and promised Jesus could rule over them all if only he made a deal with the devil. Instead of claiming power, Jesus remained faithful to God's ways of self-giving love. In him we see that change doesn't come through power over others; it comes through being vulnerable and practicing love for ourselves and others.

When we find ourselves in wilderness times, it is so tempting to try to protect ourselves and avoid feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. Yet the wilderness times can teach us to trust, to discern, and to live God's ways of love. Wilderness times can be a powerful gift and during the season of Lent, the church intentionally enters the wilderness together. We practice hungering for God's justice, we increase our times of prayer and we recommit to following Jesus in acts of mercy and love.

Let us join in a time of silent prayer now. Today our time of prayer will continue into the introduction to the Hymn of the Day. That hymn has changed to #319 O Lord, throughout These Forty Days; so I invite you to turn to that now and then join in prayer.

Let us pray.