

# Sermon for Sunday, March 1, 2020 - "Into the Wilderness"

First Sunday in Lent  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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

My parents had very different views of the wilderness. My dad so enjoyed the Boundary Waters as a teen and young adult. He was thrilled when my sister and I both fell in love with the area. Dad also loved backpacking in the mountains and rejoiced that I spent three summers working at a camp in Colorado.

My mom wasn't so sure. She wanted to like the wilderness, but she was also a worrier. Whenever one of us would head out on a wilderness adventure, she'd do a ton of research on the dangers we might face. She'd buy safety products, four types of bug spray, and every possible form of sun protection. The sun protection was an especially good idea for her pigment deficient daughters, but we didn't always appreciate that. Now that I've gotten lost out there a few too many times and after the appearance of a skin cancer spot, I can see the wisdom in my mom's ways. Being in the wilderness makes you quite vulnerable.

Jesus found himself in a very harsh kind of wilderness experience - one that is usually more imposed than chosen, a kind we often do our best to avoid.

Yet, all of us experience harsh wilderness times within our souls - times when we feel vulnerable, exposed, raw, at the mercy of forces beyond our control. Sunblock and bug spray can do nothing to protect against these elements. We also enter collective wilderness seasons, as well - as the climate grows more volatile and the coronavirus spreads, as divisions deepen in our country, as events unfold in Syria and on our southern border.

When our souls feel vulnerable, we're often tempted by things that give us the illusion of power and control, that offer a false security. In wilderness times, we're tempted in many of the same ways 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.

What matters is that Jesus shows us a different way to be with the wilderness times. When Jesus was vulnerable and famished in the wilderness, he was tempted to choose a quick fix - to just turn stones into bread. All sorts of quick fixes are available to us these days, all manner of instant gratification. And 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 seek immediate solutions, but they are rarely the most helpful response. They let us skip over the internal work we need to do in the wilderness of our own psyches, wrestling with hard truths, with our own biases and assumptions. Sometimes we need to be uncom-

fortable so there is more space within us for God to bring change, so that our hunger for God's word and 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 scripture that 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. But God gives us agency and intellect and expects us to use them.

I wonder if we put God to test when we simply pray for healing, peace and justice and then fall back and expect God to fix everything in our lives and our world. Jesus teaches us to pray differently - asking what needs to change within us. He calls us to spend time in the wilderness where we can better listen for what God wants us to do, where we discover 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 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 way of being. 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 personally and collectively, it's so tempting to try to protect ourselves, to try to avoid feelings of vulnerability. Yet the wilderness times can help us hunger for God, listen for God, and be reminded again that God brings change through 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 re-commit to following Jesus in acts of mercy and love.

As we face this wilderness together, we can trust that Jesus has gone before us into it and that he is with us in it now. We can also trust that God will minister to us in the wilderness, just as God sent angels to wait upon Jesus in the wilderness. Let's join in a prayer for our Lenten wilderness written by Jan Richardson:

I am not asking you  
to take this wilderness from me,  
to remove this place of starkness  
where I come to know  
the wildness within me,  
where I learn to call the names  
of the ravenous beasts  
that pace inside me,

to finger the brambles  
that snake through my veins,  
to taste the thirst  
that tugs at my tongue.

But send me  
tough angels,  
sweet wine,  
strong bread:  
just enough. Amen

Here we receive what we need for our Lenten wilderness - Christ's presence here for you, sweet wine, strong bread - just enough, for you.