

Title: “Pilgrims in the Wilderness”

Subtitle: Hard places are where growth and transformation happen.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/1ObN-2MOXjg>

As I began studying our Gospel today, I was struck by how many times the word wilderness is used in Mark’s first chapter. It is like a blinking light that signals that something significant happens there. The wilderness theme begins with Mark quoting from Isaiah, the prophet, who foretold us of one: “***Crying the in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.***” Then, after Jesus is baptized, “the heavens are torn open, and the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’” Then, Jesus is immediately “***driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.***”¹

When you hear the word **wilderness** so many times in one context, you cannot help but wonder what it means. In Biblical history, the children of Israel had forty years of wilderness wandering. There, they suffered hunger and thirst, were humbled by temptations, and through their time of testing, they learned “that men and women don’t live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”²

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where the Devil tempts him for 40 days. Yet, in this lonely, dangerous place, his ministry is transformed. His wilderness experience defines, changes, and fortifies him for his

¹ Mark 1:12-13

² Deuteronomy 8:3

upcoming mission. Wilderness experiences can define and transform us, too, if we let them. This has been the experience of God's people through the ages.

For example, Moses met God in the wilderness and led the people of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years. Elijah spent time in the wilderness and found God in the silence there. David spent years in the wilderness as he was pursued by Saul, who wanted to kill him. It was in that rugged place that many of the Psalms were inspired and written like that one that reads:

“O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Because the wilderness is a wild and dangerous place, we don't often choose to go there. But there are many lessons for us in that place if we are willing to acknowledge our need for God and learn to walk by faith.

A priest I met in Northern Virginia once said, “There are many ways of arriving in the wilderness. Some of us are thrust into the wilderness by life circumstances. Someone we love is diagnosed with a critical illness; we experience a loss through death, divorce, or life transition; a tragedy strikes us and causes us to challenge every assumption we have about who we are, who God is, and how God acts. We feel lost, cut off, and lonely. We wonder how God can seem absent at the very time when we need God most.”³

So, if you find yourself in the wilderness now because of illness, separation, death, or grief, and you feel as though you are

³ The Rev. Mary Kay Brown, sermon “Pilgrims in the Wilderness,” 2/25/2007

barely able to hang on, take heart. You are not alone. God is beside you, working in you to redeem your pain and struggle.

When Jesus came out of the wilderness, he “proclaimed the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand.” So even when it may seem like you are walking through a God-forsaken place, God promises to be with you through it. The Psalmist David wrote, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me, thy rod and staff, they comfort me.”⁴

But the valleys also show us that God’s plan for us is bigger than our personal need for comfort.

So, if you find yourself comfortable, content, and perhaps even a little complacent, then I invite you this Lent to open yourself to be a pilgrim in the wilderness, where growth and transformation happen for those of us willing to be disturbed.

I close this morning with words attributed to the great explorer Sir Francis Drake:

*Disturb us, Lord,
When we are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord,
When with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity,
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision of the New Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord,
To dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;*

⁴ Psalm 23:4

*Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future with us
In strength, courage, hope, and love.*

Amen.