

In 2015 I was blessed to lead a trip church to Israel. One of the powerful aspects of being in the Holy Land is that you realize that Christ's earthly ministry was...indeed quite earthly. The stories of Christ that we learn from Scripture take on new meaning when you sit on the steps where Jesus taught, drink water from the well where Christ met the Samaritan woman, stand in the waters where Jesus was baptized...the list goes on. This Lent we will look deeply at our life and spiritual journey by focusing on a different earthly element from Jesus' ministry– like wilderness, wind, water, mud and stones. Today we begin in the wilderness.

The last time I publicly read this morning's Scripture, was the first day of our tour and the tour guide asked us to read this passage as our bus pulled off the main highway on to a single lane road, into what seemed to be the middle of nowhere. As the bus came to a stop he told us that this was the Judean Wilderness where Jesus was believed to have spent his 40 days and nights. We read this passage and then he asked us to get off the bus in total silence, walk out far enough that we could still see the bus, and to just listen.

When we are quiet in New Jersey there is still noise. Whether it is a car going by, the birds chirping in the air or the

voices of a kid around the block, quiet here comes with a certain level of sound that we are accustomed too.

Let me tell you, when we climbed off the bus in silence, and we walked out and just stood there on the side of this road we just listened...to absolutely nothing. There were no birds in the air, there was no background noise of traffic. It was a lonely, isolating silence. From this picture, to our left, you could see the dead sea...filled with its lifeless salt...and everywhere else, as far as the eye could see, you just saw mountain after mountain after mountain of this desolate land that offered no vegetation, water or life. In, I don't know the 5 or 10 minutes that we stood there the silence was deafening and I wondered how much lonelier the place would be over night. It was hard to imagine how difficult it must have been for Christ to be there, alone, for 40 days and 40 nights.

Wilderness is an important symbol in Scripture, it is a common backdrop for the stories of our faith. Abraham journeyed from one place to another, seeking out the land God had promised. Moses led the Israelite people through the wilderness for 40 years on a journey to the Promised Land. Elijah fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. And today we are reminded that immediately after Jesus' baptism, and before he began his public ministry, the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, where he

fasted for 40 days and then experienced a testing of his convictions and devotion to God. During the 40 days Jesus fasted, he was drawing closer to God, listening for God's voice and guidance. I wonder if during this time, if Jesus didn't wrestle with questions like:

When life is hard, and the world feels dark, and the storms are surrounding me-to whom do I give my allegiance? Where have I placed my hope? On what altar am I willing to lay my life?

Ultimately he is confronted with temptation and passed the tests and temptations of food, power and wealth, making him stronger and more resolute to face his future.

In the wilderness you don't know where your next meal is going to come from, you don't know where you'll lay your head to rest each night, you are at the mercy of nature, and you are all alone. In the wilderness there are no distractions and there are no protections. It's just you and God. So it's no surprise that our most powerful images of God's guidance, God's presence, God's protection, and God's provision come from times that people found themselves in the wilderness.

I believe that most of us have lived through a wilderness experience or two, whether it was a journey we chose for ourselves, or a time in our lives that we felt stuck, a time of confusion, disconnection, and desolation. Wilderness time is a

part of life. We cannot live and love and engage life in meaningful ways without sometimes ending up in the wilderness. Wilderness times are those when we feel we are tested to our limits. We speak of hunger, thirst, and longing in the wilderness, an emptiness of heart and spirit and loneliness that exists even when we are surrounded by people. I think for many of us in one way or another experienced wilderness during the pandemic. Perhaps some of us here today are still in a time of wilderness right now.

But here is the good news-Wilderness times come, but they don't stay. They are not permanent. Wilderness times generally mark the end of one phase and the beginning of a new one – a time of transition and change. I think this congregation has been in an unsettled wilderness time. There has been significant change in the last few years, and in that wilderness of change it can feel quite uncomfortable and worrisome.

Jesus experienced this too. His life was about to go through a BIG change, he was about to start his public ministry, challenging the powers that be, calling people to repentance and life transformation, and sharing a message of love and healing wherever he went. This liminal space in the wilderness, a challenging and lonely time of testing in the Judean wilderness gave way to a new beginning—the beginning of his public

ministry. It prepared him and strengthened him in a way that perhaps nothing else could.

New beginnings stand at the heart of the gospel message, and I believe that as we come out of our season of wilderness as a congregation, we will thrive once more.

My friends as a congregation and in your personal lives let me assure you no matter who we are or what we've done, no matter if the wilderness is of our own making or not, God is present in the wilderness with us and can lead us through it and out of it. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, whatever that might look like for each of us, do not lose hope! There is a way out of the wilderness and a new beginning on the horizon. But you can't get there without first traveling through the wilderness, facing the temptations, the self-doubt, the struggle from within and without that accompanies this desolate landscape.

As painful as wilderness experiences are, they CAN yield **more** spiritual growth than the good times. I see it all the time. Someone goes through the painful wilderness of a divorce and as they heal, they have a stronger sense of who they are and what they want in life. I see someone go through the wilderness of a career change and financial challenges and as they rebuild their life, they have new joy and gratitude for life. I see the wilderness of strained relationships, stress and pressure at work, financial

concerns. I see someone go through the wilderness of a health crisis or grief and as they journey along, their faith is deepened, and they appreciate life in new ways.

The wilderness can be times of learning about ourselves, about God, about what is most important, and about where life is headed. Without that time of reflection, taking stock, and learning—whether in the wilderness or not—life can just go along without much thought, intentionality, or growth. When we find ourselves in the wilderness... and trust me, at some point, we will, I pray that we have the faith, hope and perseverance to take each moment, as difficult as they may be, for the gift it is.

What if we used our wilderness times to dig deep and ask ourselves:

To Whom do I give my allegiance?

Where have I placed my hope?

On what altar am I willing to lay my life?

These questions were posed by Bishop Will Willimon and they resonate deeply with me as continue to come out of the pandemic, face news of horrific war, and journey through our corporate and personal wilderness times.

As you can see from this image of the Judean wilderness, that there is a lot of sand. Each week we have a way to interact with the element of the week. So today, I'd like to invite you, after

you've received communion in your pew, to go to a tray of sand on either side of the sanctuary and just run your fingers prayerfully through the sand, or, if you are so inclined, draw a symbol of what the wilderness means for you. Perhaps in the wilderness you are learning to rely on God, perhaps in the wilderness you are finding strength to resist temptation, perhaps in the wilderness you are being called to a new beginning. Whatever the wilderness means for you today, touch the sand and for just a brief moment, block out the noises you hear and just listen for the silence of the wilderness in a moment of prayer. Family of God, may we journey deep into the wilderness, without fear, but with hope and always, with God's love. Amen.