

“Our Way in the Wilderness”
March 9, 2025, Lent I
Scripture: Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Spending time in the wilderness is a pretty common biblical theme. Even before the Exodus story, we find Abraham doing a lot of journeying from his home in Ur to the “the land God will show him.” His experience out there isn’t all that great, really. He runs into all kinds of obstacles and confrontations. By and large the experience of the wilderness is mostly negative. For the people escaping slavery in Egypt, their time in the wilderness becomes a sort of penance for their sins. When Elijah goes to the wilderness, he’s escaping the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel. For the Bible, being in the wilderness isn’t something done happily or willingly.

That’s true for us, too. When was the last time you heard a political party being in the wilderness as a positive thing for them? When our kids wander with no clear direction to their lives, it makes us a little anxious as parents. Or when our own lives hit a time of uncertainty and confusion, when we slip into the wilderness, all we want is to make our way out. So, this image of Jesus going willingly into the wilderness, depriving himself of nourishment for forty days, is a little hard to relate to for most of us.

In Mark’s version of this story, Jesus is forced out to the wilderness. But for Luke, Jesus wants to be there. This feels more like a time of preparation than of testing. His answers to the devil reflect that, I think. There’s no great struggle going on here. Nothing the devil says is taken seriously. When he tempts Jesus to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, Jesus knows he can’t do that; he knows that’s not how the world works. And when the devil offers him control over the whole world, claiming he can give it to whomever he likes, Jesus knows that’s a lie, too. The devil doesn’t have that control or that power. And the challenge to jump off the top of the temple in Jerusalem is just plain silly.

I don’t think it’s hard for Jesus to resist these temptations because they’re not really all that tempting. Jesus knows the devil has no power. None. And I think that’s the real lesson in this story. We learn here that Jesus is able to see through the illusion of power the devil likes to project. Failing to do that is why you and I get stuck in the wilderness.

We’ve been taught that those forces around us that make all kinds of claims on our allegiance actually have power over us. So we keep wandering around trying to fight them or we just give up and stop resisting entirely. Jesus doesn’t do either of those things. He doesn’t waste time arguing with the devil and he doesn’t give in. He just ignores it. And he remains rooted in God’s presence. He follows the path of compassion and humility.

That’s the path he calls us to follow as our way in the wilderness. And let’s face it, these days it feels like we’re in the wilderness. This past week we’ve seen our government turn away from our commitment to democratic freedom in Ukraine and embrace the cause of an autocratic dictator in Russia. That feels like a wilderness to me. In our own community two men who have been advocates for the LGBTQ community for years were murdered in their home, seemingly at random, leaving a terrible loss in the lives of so many who struggle in Buffalo. That feels like a

wilderness to me. And I know many of us in our personal lives can feel overwhelmed by the demands we face as parents and spouses, children and siblings. There are so many periods in our lives when we feel lost and abandoned, like we're wandering in the wilderness.

And now here we are at the beginning of the season of Lent when we're called upon to reflect on our lives and try to identify what's most important while we're surrounded by so many demands on us that make that claim. If my kid could pay more attention in school everything would be better. If I made a little bit more money everything would be better. If I didn't have to work so many hours everything would be better. It goes on and on.

But what we learn from Jesus' story is all those claims are false. And when we listen to them, when we allow them to occupy our minds and distract us, when we take them seriously, we become self-absorbed and incapable of seeing a reality beyond ourselves. That's the real danger in the wilderness. We can get stuck there going around in circles. And that can make us bitter and resentful and hard. Jesus offers us a way out.

When we can deny the power of these claims and demands over us and turn our thoughts away from ourselves and toward the needs of others, with compassion and humility, then we can make our way in the wilderness. These days of Lent are a chance for us to put aside the distractions and focus ourselves on the needs of those around us. We can't turn a stone into bread for our own nourishment, but we can provide nourishment for others; we can feed those around us who are hungry. We can't control the world or eliminate violence and loss, but we can reach out to those affected and offer support and healing. Drawing attention to ourselves through some stunt accomplishes nothing, but bringing attention to the experience of those whose lives are imperiled by bigotry and hatred and fear can actually make a difference in the world.

Our way in the wilderness is through the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Christ, as Paul tells us. And any tests that come our way don't have to cause us anxiety or struggle. So long as we live in Christ, and walk his way of humility and compassion, the wilderness will not overcome us. We'll find our way when we walk the way of Christ.

Amen