

In the Wilderness... Now What?
February 26, 2023
Matthew 4:1-11

Here we are in the wilderness season of Lent, 40 days not counting Sundays. An echo of Jesus 40 days in the wilderness right after his baptism and before he begins his ministry. An echo of the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness, after liberation from Egypt and before entering the promised land.

I don't know about you but I kind of wanted to skip this year's late winter Lenten deep-in-the-soil-of-the-soul inward reflection and go right to springtime light and new life. To skip it this year because we've been introverting enough for the last almost three years, and some of us are just beginning to get back out into the world, family gatherings and restaurants and the theater and travel. But! Let's trust the wisdom of our religion and do this Lenten thing together!

Yes, let's do our religion. Engage our right brain and be immerse in our stories, rituals, poetry and songs. Nothing else can feed the deep hunger of the soul quite like it.

A young man who was diagnosed with a terminal and devastating illness writes about what he knows to be true. (Simmons) "Of all the sources of insight available to me, I turn to religion in particular because it is with religious language that human beings have most consistently, rigorously, and powerfully explored the harrowing business of rescuing joy from heartbreak." He is grateful for all of humanity's left brain brilliance, especially medicine. But he passes over all the essays found in magazines sold at the grocery store, or online newsletters, or Ted Talks, or even the science section of the Times... that try to translate right brain, wisdom ways from religion into boring, dry left brain bullet points, "Often following a formula—start with a catchy anecdote, trot out an appropriately credentialed expert and then let the expert get down to the business of dishing out nuggets of advice set off in the text with bullet points, and wrap it up with a neat moral." This tears away the beautiful mythology, poetry, ritual, song,that different way of knowing... Scientific research tells us that community is good for our health...*oh really?* so is altruism... *oh really?* And the science section even had an article about experiencing awe, that's good for our health too.... Those of us who are religious read these scientific studies and do a big collective *duh*....

Religion is not without its faults, some serious, but I'd rather drink from the same well of wisdom as Maimonides and Julian of Norwich and Howard Thurman and that unnamed monastic living in the caves of Cappadocia in the 9th century than the clever blogger who is skilled at synthesizing and bullet pointing. Ripening the human soul takes time and only the best ingredients.

Yes, let's go together into the season of Lent, as our ancestors in the faith have done for centuries. Let's go into the wilderness and trust that it will ripen our souls....

The wilderness...

If the pandemic isn't a collective harrowing wilderness experience, I don't know what is. It's hard to believe what we've lived through the last almost three years and still are.... Plagues distort the body and the soul of humankind, more than we can fathom. They always have. Not only killing millions, but inflicting emotional and psychological damage, rending the social fabric, eroding trust, deepening political divisions.

Imagine one of those giant heart of the beast puppets... a dragon with Covid on its fiery breath and a long, powerful tail that swishes around violently leaving mayhem in its wake... democracies folding, a covid isolated/paranoid Putin invading Ukraine, growing distrust of science and vaccines, increasing deaths of despair, schools and hospital systems stressed to the max, some near collapse and same with the arts, theater and musicIronically, some things that giant tail exposed and riled up were liberating, an inciting of world wide racial and colonial reckoning after the death of George Floyd....

And think of the disruption in our own homes, of our beloved children's lives... Have you heard the latest news about youth mental health and reading scores? The word disrupting hardly does it justice, what happened and continues in the aftermath- damaging, eroding, upending, rending... Choose your verb for the effects of the covid pandemic on the world.

And what about the church? Churches, and other religious institutions, are in hard times.

The pandemic and its after affects are now really being felt. Though the tide may be turning at Mayflower, slowly more and more are returning to this sanctuary, and full for Acoustic Christmas, 70 people at a Saturday night church chili cook off, a wonderful new member class forming, Faith formation activities are a go!—OWL lock ins, Confirmation retreats, 6th and 7th grade, and youth group lock ins, the Shalom Hill Farm Trip, the youth work trip to Washington DC, all ages art afternoons, and the faith formation visioning team is calling, checking in with those families we haven't seen..... Yes, though the tide may be turning, still our church, like most, is anxious.

We are in a wilderness time. Covid severed the communal body, ripped apart the social fabric of Mayflower. Just three years ago we were kicking off a revival with other Twin Cities UCC churches, planning to bring it into greater MN, a revival of our kind of faith. And now just three years later, we wonder where are all the families and the children of our church? And what is the long term impact of livestreaming? Livestreaming was a lifesaver for us during Covid, and it still is for those who are unable to come to church, but what about everyone else? When we don't come to church, in person, it is harder for the spirit to weave us together into intergenerational community. Never underestimate the importance of those conversations,

before church, after, in the hallway, in the parking lot, whether small talk or deep talk, everyone's life energy makes us church. And our church finances? For good reasons, the return of full staff, like child care workers a building manager so Thor doesn't need to do it all, full time Faith Formation director, and for hard reasons, crazy inflation, and the unclear terrain of membership and so, pledges, our budget is tighter and more concerning than I've ever experienced in my almost two decades at Mayflower. Sleepless nights are more common....

Wilderness times indeed!!

Our holy scripture, our stories, our mythology, tells us that it is in the wilderness times that we are put to the test, that we are most tempted to lose our way, to sin, to weakness of character.

In our story today "Jesus was tempted to be relevant, to be spectacular, to be powerful. He resisted the temptations and stayed true to God." (McKenzie) He said: "Away with you Satan, for it is written, Worship God, and serve only God."

What about you? What are your temptations? The Catholic monk, Thomas Keating, names the common temptations, when we are not well grounded in God; common temptations for those of us whose basic needs are met, but to calm our existential anxiety... the temptations... an inordinate desire for control, affection, esteem, approval, security. Away with you Satan! We will breathe deeply and let go of these inordinate desires for control and instead open ourselves to the presence and action of God within.

What about church? Our church? What is our greatest temptation in this wilderness time of pandemic and its aftershocks? If only we could magically pull an extra half hour or hour out of the air, and I'd pause my sermon and ask you the question found in the bulletin—"If Satan places three temptations before us **today** as a church what would they be?" There would be a great variety of responses, no doubt! wise, all of them! And together we'd begin to venture some solutions too....solutions born of anxiety or trust?

In our holy book, in the great story of the exodus and the wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, the people were tested and they started erecting one golden calf after another and some even started longing for their life in Egypt where at least they knew their place and there was food to eat.

Yes, wilderness time is a very challenging time for human beings.

I have a pile of yellow legal pad pages, full of notes from my research and reflections and notes from recent state and national conferences and from the Christian century magazine,

so many yellow legal pad notes floating around on the floor of my study at home as I let go of them to write this sermon. Notes about how we are being tested as church and possible solutions.... But one phrase keeps jumping up at me, I swear those papers on the floor keep moving around, vying for my attention but this phrase rises to the top, with great persistence!

The greatest temptation during wilderness times is to treat God as less than God.

This is not to say that God is in control. That it's all in God's plan. That everything happens for a reason. (Don't anyone dare say this pandemic was part of God's plan. That's bad theology.) Rather, it's trusting in our heart of hearts that God is with us, strengthening us in this wilderness time and empowering us, if we consent, to live into this future faithfully, creatively, and ever and always compassionately. God is inviting us to intensify our commitment to the Jesus path--- to welcome everyone, to care for one another in this good but hard life, to keep on keeping on with our multi generational school for the heart, to work for God's dream of justice for all and for the earth and to exorcise the original sin of racism from the soul of our nation and our own souls. Will our beloved members continue to return as they juggle and reset their life values and schedules and will new people be drawn to this community? It remains a question. But no matter what, our identity will only be strengthened in this wilderness time. we will not be silenced or milque-toasty with shame from being associated with Christian fundamentalism and nationalism. On the contrary, we will, figuratively speaking, (we speak figuratively a lot in religion), all climb up on the roof, blessing our outside banners as we move up, LGBTQ and Immigrant welcoming... we will all go to the top and stand in the midst of the 200 solar panels and the cross and we'll proclaim to the world: **"We are Christian!"** and.... **"God is the power of love that can move mountains....."**

So you are lying awake in the middle of the night, the wilderness time within the wilderness time, and you're worrying about this church you've invested so much in (I know many of you can relate to this) and you're thinking about solutions, this helps you control your anxiety, your brow is no doubt furrowed and your jaw tense, as you toss and turn.... And then a new thought comes to you, and your face relaxes with a little smile even, and you are able to give yourself over to the miracle of sleep. So many miracles in this life...

What is the new thought?

Be open. Be curious. About the future. You can't know it. You can't control it. Don't be fearful. Be curious. It's all so very interesting!! You won't sit on the sidelines and merely observe. You'll invest yourself fully but you will let go of the need to control. There are no maps, church. We are in uncharted waters, a pandemic for God's sake. Rather than fear, openness and trust. We need to live this paradox as a church.... Striving toward goals, but at the same time letting them go.

“Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.” (Nietzsche) Living fully, consciously, wide awake in the midst of it all... it’s really so very interesting, this life, it’s unpredictability, uncontrollability... yes, so much suffering but still and yet and how is it so?, so much beauty, kindness, resilience, love....

Remember the revival three years ago, we were dreaming of another great awakening in our land, of our kind of faith, we were going to bring it into greater Minnesota, and we kicked it off , was it one week before the pandemic hit the headlines?...hmmm.... Who knows? Maybe the Fourth great awakening will be brought out of this wilderness time of pandemic and its aftermath?

Stranger things have happened in the thousands of years of human history!

“Oh God, Who has called us your servants, to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden and through perils unknown;

Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us. Amen... “

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