



“Wilderness Times”

Sermon preached by Anne Ledbetter

February 28, 2010

Scripture – Luke 4: 1-13

Luke tells us this morning, that still dripping from his baptism by John in the river Jordan, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. What about you? Have you been led by the Spirit to take a sojourn to the wilderness? Many modern-day disciples venture into the wild for spiritual replenishment – hiking in Yosemite, biking in Vermont, canoeing through the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota, backpacking among the Canadian Rockies. My favorite wilderness area lies near Abiquiu, New Mexico, at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian retreat center comprising 21,000 acres, which is essentially desert. Today many people head to the wilderness to re-connect with God, to strip away the stuff of their lives and regain clarity on what’s important. In his book *Renewal in the Wilderness*, pastor and wilderness guide John Lionberger explores a number of reasons for spiritual treks to the outback. He asserts that the wilderness stretches our physical and spiritual boundaries and opens us up for the possibility of radical change. The wilderness is God’s hull-scraper, stripping us of the barnacles of civilization that slow us and divert us in our pursuit of God – and God’s pursuit of us. In the wilderness we become aware of our finitude and God’s infinitude. The wilderness leads us into silence and solitude which nurture intimate time with ourselves and God.<sup>i</sup>

Yet the wilderness of the Bible is not a national park nor a mammoth ranch, but rather a place of isolation and death. Replete with demons and seemingly void of God, this untamed and unknown place was entered only at great risk. To venture into the wilderness was to risk becoming lost and even dying.

After his baptism, Jesus strikes out in the wilderness. Maybe he was trying to make sense of that voice he heard when he came out of the water. “You are my Son...the Beloved...” Jesus fasts those forty days he is gone – wrestling with his own appetite, his own dreams, and a voice which tempts him to take what he needs: bread for his hunger, power, glory and authority from on high, and safety and grandeur. This devil knows his scripture and tries to beguile Jesus into using his powers for food, fame and fortune. But Jesus stands firm in his faith, relying steadfastly on God. He rebuffs each enticement with words from Deuteronomy, the Law or Torah. Though he sounds like the clever rabbi volleying scripture with the Tempter, perhaps his answers more nearly resemble a lost child who clings to spiritual crumbs he holds in his mind and heart – the internalized Word of the Spirit that pleads for us when we cannot.<sup>ii</sup> These

morsels of scripture are enough to vanquish temptation, and Luke tells us that Jesus returns from the wilderness full of the Spirit of God. When he emerges from this wild space, Jesus has a clarity that could not have come otherwise. The three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, cite this moment as the beginning of Jesus' ministry. His duel in the desert with the devil launches Jesus into Galilee where he began to preach the good news. What do we make of this wilderness experience?

When we think about it, our wilderness times, more often than not, do not occur in Acadia National Park, or the Badlands of South Dakota, but in our mere mortality – our everyday fragile human lives. Maybe wilderness was a hospital waiting room where minutes felt like hours while your loved one underwent surgery, or a dingy motel room where you spent the night after being kicked out of your house, or the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job.<sup>iii</sup>

I suspect most of us are better acquainted with this other harsh topography in life – the wilderness of cancer or Alzheimer's, Parkinson's or diabetes; the desolation of unemployment, the wasteland of infertility, the rough country of taking care of a child with special needs or nursing an aging parent, the wilderness of divorce or depression or addiction, the barren landscape of grief. What do such wilderness times conjure for you? Feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, hunger, exhaustion, bone-chilling fear, abandonment by God. So often when we are in the wilderness we find ourselves desperately hungering and thirsting for God, and the Holy One seems silent, AWOL.

Thirty years ago, upon completing seminary, I found myself with a masters degree, but without a call to a church. Instead, I was working a part-time job at a presbytery resource center in the basement of a library. It was a low and lonely job. Texas-sized cockroaches (yes, I lived in Austin!) were my most eager companions. Whenever the elevator came to life and started lurching down with its deep mechanical hum, I would get giddy about my potential client. However, more times than not the person on the elevator would have pushed the wrong button, and would leave before even bidding hello. It was a lonesome and depressing time – especially when my friends were beginning their first pastorates and described days of preparing worship bulletins, doing hospital calls, performing their first baptism, and so on. After 18 months of wandering in the wilderness, seeking a call to a church, I asked for a meeting with the presbytery's committee charged with caring for candidates for ministry, such as myself. I sought their support, their wisdom, their encouragement, their counsel. I tried to explain how **alone** I felt – lost and untethered, saying, "I feel like I'm in the wilderness and don't know where to go."

After listening to my woeful soliloquy, one gentleman – a pastor from Boerne, TX, probably in his forties, with red curly hair, and a bit pompous I might add, said to me rather paternalistically, "Well, you know, the Bible tells us that a lot can be learned in the wilderness." It's not what I wanted to hear. I felt patted on the head and kicked in the rear. I wanted them to sympathize, to bolster my dwindling self-esteem, to assure me that my sojourn would presumably end soon, that there was an oasis on the horizon, or that they would recruit someone from the committee to minister to me in my desolation. But instead, this guy simply spoke with audacious presumption. It felt like he was saying, "Well, little lady, you just hang tight. God's got a lesson or two for you out there in no man's land." (which, by the way, in the early 1980's

in the Presbyterian Church, felt like no *woman's* land!) I left feeling angry, hurt, and more alone than ever. It took me at least ten years to realize that God had been speaking through this guy – a lot can be learned in the wilderness.

You see, that difficult period proved to be a defining time for me, a clarifying time. I would not have chosen it, but it happened. Methodist friends suggested I join their ranks, and the District Superintendent would appoint me to a church. Voila! I'd have my parish. Other voices – including an internal one – advised I simply seek a different line of work. I would be dishonest to say that this one was not enticing at times. But part of me knew it would not be faithful to my inner sense of call. Entering seminary I had been unsure whether parish ministry was my calling, and I had leaned towards pastoral counseling. But after several years in the wilderness of not having a church, I felt somewhat like Jacob who wrestled with God and came away changed. How much simpler it would have been to walk away, to pursue a different line of work, but I felt something akin to the Spirit holding me in the wilderness, molding me in the wilderness, and slowly unfolding a gracious path out of the wilderness.

What were Jesus' lessons? According to Luke, the devil wrestled them out of him. First, one does not live by bread alone. Indeed, when stripped of the trappings of life, we too encounter the deep knowledge that all we need is God. Secondly, God is the only one we are to worship and serve. Not our family, not our friends, not our job, not our country, not ourselves and our own ego – but God, pure and simple. And finally, Jesus discovered that God is enough. God will take care of us and see us through any and every barren stretch of our journey. In all the wilderness times of our lives God will take care of us. Maybe God won't heal the cancer, save our marriage, bring back our beloved, or guarantee us the job, but God will send us angels to minister to us – maybe in the guise of a Stephen Minister, or a therapist, an attentive neighbor or kind friend, a caring hospice nurse, or even a pompous Presbyterian pastor from Boerne, Texas.

Our journey in life inevitably takes us through difficult terrain, uncharted territory, desolate deserts, and yes, wilderness tracts. More often than not, these will not be segments of life we choose, but life events which find us and through which the Spirit helps us rediscover ourselves and God. Wilderness times are not to be conquered but endured, as we learn through the suffering and questioning and wandering, and are eventually able to discern God's ministering angels waiting on us, amidst the wild beasts of fear, self-pity, hunger, and loneliness. This wilderness within can ultimately set us free, for here we will most certainly encounter the Holy One. For the desert is not God-forsaken nor does it belong to the devil. It is God's home. There is no place in life devoid of God's grace – not even a cross. The Holy Spirit is there, within us and beside us. And if we cannot feel that Spirit inside us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far way, with enough in him to sustain us, enough to give us courage and comfort and peace.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> John Lionberger, *Renewal in the Wilderness* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2007.) pp. 4-5.

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<sup>ii</sup> Rebecca Lyman, “The Grace of Bewilderment” Essay on [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net)

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Wilderness Exam” [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org)

<sup>iv</sup> John Stendahl, quoted by Kate Huey, “Wilderness Companions”  
<http://i.uss.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds>