

## “DRIVEN INTO THE WILDERNESS”

PSALM 25, GENESIS 9:8-17

MARK 1:9-15

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN  
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

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Our Gospel lesson begins with Jesus' Baptism. In Mark's account, only Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him. Only he hears the voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This means that Mark allows the readers of his Gospel information that the characters in the story do not possess. At the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark makes it clear who Jesus is and what role he will play. This divine revelation makes it clear, at least to those reading the text, that Jesus is God's son and an agent of God's salvation.

Immediately then, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. It is significant that Jesus is tempted immediately following his Baptism. It is in keeping with the ancient literary device that the hero must be tested before embarking on his quest. Jesus, the hero of our story, is tested and proven strong enough to succeed. One might also think of this as a testing of his calling. Can he really live into his call to proclaim good news and offer salvation to his people? Does he have the chutzpah to carry it out?

I think, however, of the temptation of Jesus as a metaphor and a connection to Jesus' humanness. Immediately after receiving the divine revelation and the affirmation of his relationship to God, his faith is tested just as our faith is tested over and over again throughout our lives. If Jesus is to be fully human, he must struggle in the wilderness for the wilderness is an essential and unavoidable part of the human experience.

Each one of us is driven or pushed into our own wilderness at some point in our lives. We are driven into the wilderness when the doctor delivers a grim diagnosis, when the one we love leaves us physically or emotionally, when stress or anxiety rob us of stability and peace, when we are abused or taken advantage of, when the bills pile up, when the ones we love die, when our bodies are wounded and broken, when relationships crumble and friendships become toxic, when our children suffer, when fear grips us, or

when we are oppressed because of the color of our skin, the one we love, the gender we express, or our immigration status.

Sooner or later, each of us finds ourselves in the wilderness, tested, dried out, wasted, and hungry. We cannot avoid these wilderness places any more than Jesus was able to avoid the temptation. Life has a way of driving us headlong into them. To live is to know both joy and sorrow, as one of my favorite writers declares in his book, *The Prophet*. Kahlil Gibran writes,

“Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.  
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.  
And how else can it be?  
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.  
Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?  
And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?  
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.  
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight....”<sup>1</sup>

Joy and sorrow are inseparable. To deny either robs us of life. To deny or to fail to celebrate the joy and goodness in our own lives leaves us angry, forlorn, hopeless, and aimless. It makes us bitter and begrudging of other's joy. To deny the sorrow in our own lives leads to hard hearts and the denial of other people's pain and sorrow. It robs us of compassion. It makes us less human because it strips us of the ability to see the complexity of the human condition and to see the humanness of the other.

This is not to say that that our suffering and sorrow is ordained by God or even fully acceptable to God. For Romans 8 reminds us that we, along with all of creation are groaning and waiting for full redemption.<sup>2</sup> This is not the final answer, but it is the human experience at this time. We know deep sorrow and we experience loss and pain that frankly, is not a part of the coming kingdom. Still, to live in this world and to be fully human, we must acknowledge the wilderness and live in and through it. For this life will also contain great joy but to know joy, we must experience the sorrow of the wilderness.

It is not an accident that Lent is 40 days long. It corresponds to the 40 days of Jesus' temptation and the 40 years of the Israelites' desert wandering. From those 40 days, Jesus busts onto the scene proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” From those 40 years of wandering, the Israelites emerged as a nation and as a people remade and reclaimed as God's own.

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<sup>1</sup> Gibran, Kahlil. “*The Prophet*.” Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 1978

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:18-30

In the wilderness, we are reshaped and remade. We are reminded, sometimes painfully, of our utter dependence on God. And if our hearts and minds are open and willing, we may find anew that God is present - even in the driest, wildest, and most desolate of places. The Israelites encountered God at the Red Sea, as food rained down as manna each morning, and in the giving of the commandments. Jesus encountered God as the angels waited upon him and the wild beasts kept him company. Certainly, there are angels attending to us, even if the angel looks only like a friendly clerk at the gas station where you get your cup of coffee each day on the way to the hospital where the one you love is wounded or dying.

The wilderness is the place where we are not only tempted, and our sorrow laid bare, but where we are transformed and reshaped and called home to God's heart. It is the place where we are hollowed out that we might one day contain more joy. It is also the place from which our sorrow or anger can find direction, meaning, and purpose. For example, to live as fully and as joyfully as possible in the face of a devastating diagnosis is to say that death is not the enemy. It is to declare that despair and hopelessness cannot and will not reign because God claims us in life and in death.

To turn to God in such times, means we turn away from all the voices that call us to walk another path. To turn to God means we, like the Israelites, lay claim to our inheritance as children of God and resist the temptations and fears of our day. We may not fear starvation in the desert, but we are living in a time of fear, of polarization, of selfishness, and distrust of the other. We are living in a time when children go to school and do not return.

We as a nation, I believe, are in the wilderness. We are in the driest of deserts for our children are the ones suffering for our sins. Our children are dying in their classrooms. As one who works with and loves the young people of this congregation and as a new mother who loves her daughter more than her own life, I have found myself filled with rage this week and deep in the wilderness. I have worked to resist the urge to let my heart harden and numb. I have read their names and looked at their pictures. I have committed myself to calling my legislators and Congressmen. I am claiming what this wilderness has made clear to me. My child's life, your child's life is more precious than anyone's right to buy AR-15 rifle. My child's life, your child's life is more precious than all the money the NRA can throw at our politicians.

I recognize that this is a complex issue and that we must also offer good mental health care to our citizens and our young people. I also know that gun control is a divisive topic, and many may believe it has no place in the church or preached from the pulpit, but my friends, my beloveds how long, how long will we wander in the wilderness unwilling to try something, to give up something, to let go just a little to save the lives of our children? Something must change. We must change. We need to be remade as Christians, as people, and as a nation. And I do not believe that the change required is one of arming more citizens. This is our wilderness and its painful and some are bearing a loss most of us cannot and do not want to even imagine.

Many are saying that we must pray. And we must. We must pray for those who are grieving, for young ones who are traumatized, and for those who have lost their lives. But in prayer, we do more than offer condolences. Prayer is about turning to God, about reorienting, about taking our sorrow to God and allowing God to work in and through us. Turning to God means turning away from all the voices calling us to walk some other path. Turning to God, means turning away from any and all voices that declare that the right to own and easily purchase an AR-15 or any other such deadly weapon is more valuable than another's life. Turning to God in prayer means that we unequivocally declare that life is sacred because it belongs to God.

Tonight, at AWE, at our Alternative Worship Experience, we are wrestling with the theme of "Resistance." The planning team invited Naomi Washington-Leapheart, who is a UCC pastor and Faith Work Director at Equality PA, to help lead the service. She will present the idea of disbelief as laid out by Christopher Morse in his book, "Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief."

Morse writes in his introduction, "If to believe in God is at the same time to disbelieve that which is not of God, every Christian confession of faith may be seen not only as affirming belief in God, but as entailing disbelief of what this faith in God refuses....One of the plainest examples of this is provided by what may be the earliest of Christian confessions, "Jesus Christ is Lord."... The word "Lord" had a secular denotation in the Roman world. Only Caesar preeminently could be Lord. The loyalty oath, the pledge of allegiance, through the empire was expressed in the words, "Kyrios Kaisar" ("Caesar is Lord"). Baptism in such a social environment was in part a radical political act, for the confession of "Jesus Christ as Lord" represented a subversive claim. Entailed in the faith that Jesus was Lord was the disbelief of Caesar as Lord. The disbelief is what gave the confession concrete meaning and timeliness in that social context. The early Christians were persecuted not for what they professed to believe, but for their disbeliefs."

My friends, in the wilderness, we must confront not only what we believe, but what we disbelieve or what we refuse to accept. As Christians, we declare the Jesus Christ is Lord. This is both an affirmation of what we believe and a declaration of our disbeliefs. This is an affirmation of justice and mercy and of the sacredness of human life before God. It is a declaration that we do not accept or that we disbelieve any form of injustice or greed or act by an individual or government or special interest group that does not first and foremost place value on each and every life, no matter the age, race, class, faith, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, or worldly condition. It is a disbelief that guns or even the Second Amendment deserve our loyalty because our loyalty belongs only to Jesus Christ who is Lord of our lives.

We have just begun the 40-day journey of Lent. This is a time to consider the wilderness places in our lives. This work is both personal and corporate. While we walk through our own wilderness, we must also walk through the wilderness created by Parkland, Kentucky, Newtown, and Columbine.

It is a season in which to pay attention to how our sorrow and joy are intertwined. And it is a time in which we are invited to reflect upon and then articulate not only what we believe but what we disbelieve. It is a season of turning to God and rejecting any and all voices that would nudge us on another path. Lent is not an easy season. It is not supposed to be easy. It is supposed to be a time to growth, of transformation, of being remade and reshaped.

May this Lent be a time of deepened faithfulness. May we find God and purpose and direction in the wilderness.

May it be so. Amen.