

Transforming the Wilderness into Eden

Sermon

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Based on Mark 1:9-13

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Once again, we have entered into the season of Lent. This is a period of time set aside for inner reflection, repentance, abstinence, sacrificial giving. It is a time for us to be more serious about our relationship with God. We up our game, so to speak. And we take the time to do this because we know what comes next – the holiest week of the year for us, the week that leads to the great celebration of Easter. So it is a time for sober reflection, of prayer, fasting and giving of alms as the traditional pattern calls for.

So I invite you to imagine beginning this journey toward Easter as a journey in the wilderness. We heard in the scriptures that Jesus began his journey to the cross by spending forty days in the wilderness. So let your journey to the cross begin in the wilderness as well.

What is the wilderness like? I will be the first to tell you that I have never been in the wilderness. I have never been far from a road that can take me to a convenience store in a short period of time. But when I think about wilderness, I imagine there are no roads, no towns, no services, no internet. Not only are you off the grid, you are off the map. Something could happen to you and it might take days, even weeks, for someone to find you, if you ever get found. The wilderness is a place where you must be resilient when the unexpected happens. You have to make do, get creative with the resources you have, don't let anything go to waste. To be in the wilderness requires a great deal of self-discipline. You can't drink all the water the first two days you are out there. The canned peaches are going to need to last awhile so maybe eat only a couple slices a day. The wilderness is a place where there are wild animals, snakes, nasty biting insects. Did I say snakes? Wilderness is not tamed. It is wild-erness. The human footprint is minimal to non-existent. In the wilderness we have to do the civilizing and ordering ourselves. It

has not been done for us. In the wilderness, we have to make a place to dwell. We have to create the space in which we will live. We have to transform the wildness into a garden.

So how do we experience the wilderness? Of course, we could head for Alaska. There is plenty of wilderness there. But does wilderness have to be a geographic place? I wonder if for most of us our experience of the wilderness is of a different type. It is more like a way to describe the state of our souls. It is an inner reality. We can think of times in our lives where we didn't know where we were going and there were no maps or roads to lead us to where we wanted to be. Maybe that wilderness experience was a time of loss. You left home and were living in a new city where you didn't know anyone. Everything was strange. Where's the grocery store? Where do I get my haircut? Where's the bank? How does the mass transportation system work? You are surrounded by strangers and feel alone. And you have to make your home in the wilderness of this strange new city. Or maybe you have experienced the wilderness due to a dramatic change of life circumstances. Your career has ended, either through retirement, or those jobs disappeared, or for whatever reason you can't work in that field anymore. Now what do you do? Part of your identity was wrapped up in that job and now it's gone, along with a part of who you are. Your life is different now. It feels untethered, adrift. Little is familiar now that you don't get up in the morning to go to work and you don't have a paycheck to deposit. The world goes on but you are just lost. Life has become like a wilderness. Or maybe your wilderness has been spiritual in nature. Your relationship with God used to be vibrant. You would come to worship on Sunday, sing the hymns, be moved by the special music, and get all the God bumps. You would dive into the word for your daily devotion, have an ongoing conversation with God all day long, consistently sense God's presence. But now all that is gone. Your spiritual life is as dry as a desert. You haven't sensed God's presence in a long time. You come to worship and sing the hymns but it's just going through the motions of the Sunday morning routine. Your Bible sits there collecting dust. Your life is grey, uninspired, devoid of meaning or

direction. And you feel like you are all alone. That's what the wilderness can be like.

We hear that after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, as he came up from the water the Spirit came down upon him in the form of a dove that descended from the heavens that were ripped open as a voice says from heaven, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. He was not led by the Spirit, as Matthew and Luke have it. No he was driven. Jesus was expelled from civilization, pushed into the wilderness. And while he spent forty days in the wilderness, Mark tells us three things about his time there: he was tempted by Satan, lived with the wild animals, and was tended to by angels. What are we to make of this? Mark is incredibly sparing with the details. It is like he has left the storyteller an outline and left it up to the storyteller to fill in the details, to put flesh on the bones. So I've been working on trying to fill out the story. I suggest to you that what we have in Jesus' time in the wilderness is a reversal of what happened in the Garden of Eden. Jesus spends his time in the wilderness beginning the work of transforming the wilderness into a garden.

Consider the parallels. According to Gen. 3:24, Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden. Jesus was driven into the wilderness. Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan and gave in to the temptation. Jesus was tempted by Satan but did not give in to the temptation. Adam and Eve lived with the wild beasts in their time in Eden. Jesus lives with the wild beasts in his time in the wilderness. There is a tradition that angels tended to the needs of Adam and Eve when they lived in Eden. Here angels tend to Jesus while he lives in the wilderness. I believe that what Mark is suggesting without explicitly saying it is that Jesus is the new Adam whose essential ministry is to transform the wilderness of this world into the new Eden, to bring everything back to the way it was before the Great Fall. Jesus's ministry is at its core the ministry of restoration.

Now if this is true, if this is what Mark is trying to communicate, what do we do with this? Perhaps in our own wilderness experiences we can once again look to Jesus, who is our companion, our friend, our

brother. We can draw comfort and strength by affirming in faith that Jesus walks with us through our lives. Sometimes he is even carrying us. We can look to the teachings of Jesus as a guide for how we are to live our daily lives. While we still roam the wilderness at least we have a set of ethical teachings so that we know how to treat other people, know what to value, what matters most in life. We can live our lives in the wilderness claiming our identity as those who represent Christ in the world. We can operate out of the conviction that we are part of the body of Christ even as we try to make sense of the spaces in which we live or make our way with low spiritual vitality.

Maybe we can join with Mark and place our hope on Jesus, the one who restores life, who can transform our wilderness experience into something new, something life giving, something like Eden. Perhaps.

What if we look to what Jesus does in the wilderness and frame it as a way we are to live as Christ followers? What would it mean for us who live in the wilderness of this world to resist the temptations of Satan, to live with the wild animals, and to be tended to by angels? Let's take a few minutes and reflect on what living our wilderness wandering life after the pattern of Jesus might look like.

First, what would it mean for us to resist the temptations of Satan? That's a constant struggle, isn't it? The ways we are tempted are of such variety, intensity and subtlety that it is impossible for me to enumerate them. Each of us is tempted by Satan in ways customized to each one of us. And it is relentless. Until we draw our last breath the temptations will come. And let's face it, Jesus could overcome the temptations of Satan because he's Jesus. We are not as fortunate. In fact, we may be tempted to not even try to resist, but to give in to the temptations. The temptation to surrender, to fall into despair, is real. But when that temptation is resisted, something beautiful happens.

This past week in Westerville has been nothing short of amazing. Never before had Westerville lost a police officer in the line of duty and Saturday a week ago two were shot and killed. Now the temptation was to let anger win the day. But whatever anger there is has been completely overwhelmed by love and support. In thousands and thousands of unique ways, the community has surrounded the officers

that remain to let them know that they have the support of the community. Westerville has come together like I have rarely seen a community do. This evil action became the catalyst for an amazing outpouring of love and commitment to keep Westerville as a great place to live. Westerville resisted the temptations of Satan this week, and it was an amazing thing to experience.

We turn to the eighteenth school shooting in the first 45 days of the year. It was on Ash Wednesday/Valentine's Day. Seventeen people were killed and many more injured by one young man armed with an AR-15. We've seen this before. For some, I believe an increasing number of us, what happened on Wednesday is no longer shocking. We've lived through this pattern so many times. The temptation here is for despair, of regretful acceptance that school shootings are the new normal. Will we as a society give in to that temptation? I fear that after Newtown that this is exactly what we as a nation did. I hope I'm wrong. I hope that if we have fallen into the temptation of despair that we will repent and commit as a nation to do whatever it takes to assure that school shootings are so rare that they become shocking again. Maybe it has to start with you and me refusing to settle for what happened in Parkland as just the way things are in America. We can't have the society God longs for if we succumb to the temptation of despair.

I want to talk quickly about these two other parts of Jesus' time in the wilderness, where he lived with the wild beasts and where angels tended to him. I think we can connect Jesus living with the wild beasts as pointing to our responsibility to be faithful stewards of creation. Jesus didn't kill the wild beasts. He didn't domesticate the wild beasts. He didn't lock the wild beasts in cages or turn them into pets. He lived with the wild beasts, just like how Adam and Eve lived with the wild beasts. That's how we ought to approach our relationship with the environment. Now, let's face it, we as a species have done a lot of domestication of the wild. Zoos have an important mission so I'm not running them down. But it still seems to me that zoos are not quite what God intends. We as a species have done quite a job dominating the environment. And a growing number of people are drawing the conclusion that our impact on the environment has triggered the sixth great extinction. That is what

we are living in now. It is happening. What we are left with is to try to mitigate the impact of the extinction and hope that we are not one of the species that will become extinct. That's just where we are. So how can we be mindful of our impact on the environment? What choices can we make, what actions can we take to live with the environment rather than dominate or destroy it?

Finally, a word about being tended to by angels. One of my favorite scriptures is Hebrews 13:2. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hospitality to strangers: this is what we are supposed to do. And by hospitality I don't mean tea and cookies. I mean creating a space of mutual sharing. A space where the host offers to the guest a comfortable space, food and drink and the guest offers the host a story, words of wisdom, or a good laugh. Hospitality is about mutuality. It is about seeing in the face of the stranger the face of a potential angel who has something to offer you. Can you see how radical it is to look at the stranger as not someone to fear or hide from but as someone who has something you need? A wilderness of strangers becomes transformed into a host of secret angels waiting to be coaxed out of hiding through your hospitality. We should try to engage strangers in this way and see what happens. I wonder how it might transform our society if we did.

There are times when the world seems so dangerous, so damaged and broken, that we would rather stay enclosed, whether that be inside the church, inside our homes, inside our circle of friends and family, inside ourselves. We want to wall ourselves off from all the crazy wilderness that is the world in which we live. But the Spirit drives us into the wilderness. We are driven into this society in which we live. We must be wilderness dwellers. And as we live in the wilderness, however we experience it, let us look to Jesus, the master gardener, who wanders with us through the wilderness. Let us look to each other, that we might wander through the wilderness together. Let us trust the Spirit that moves within us, prompting, guiding, strengthening, as we each do our part to transform the wilderness into some semblance of a restored Eden.