



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 10, 2019
DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11; PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16; ROMANS 10:8-13; LUKE 4:1-13

WILDERNESS QUESTIONS



The gospel on this First Sunday in Lent always recounts Jesus' journey into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan, and tended to by angels. That he is fasting and alone accentuates the acuity of his struggle, and invites us to consider how our own wilderness experiences take shape.

For Jesus, he departs for the wilderness having just stepped out of the waters of baptism, where he hears the voice from

heaven and those around him affirming him as beloved, as special. The juxtaposition is an important one, and while his wilderness test is uniquely messianic, the pattern may provide clues for us as well in our own lives.

If we were to map our faith journeys, we all begin with an affiliative faith—believing those things we are taught by our parents, teachers, possibly clergy, and others. We don't think about why we believe something;

we just believe. This is the case with most aspects of life as well. Chances are, if your parents are politically progressive, you will be also, at least until you begin to question your beliefs, which is an important part of adolescence and young adulthood.

Maria Montessori said that parents, in their healthy expression, give children the safety of a container in which they come to know they are beloved simply by the mirroring of that love. Richard Rohr calls this stage of life, Order, because as it comes to you, it makes sense—at least until it doesn't.

Sooner or later, life throws every one of us curveballs that cause us to question our worldview as being too simple, or too glossy, or just wrong. This is the second stage of life, which Rohr calls Disorder, because what had made perfect sense before doesn't add up anymore. This is often called wilderness or desert experience because it is unfamiliar, uncertain, even scary.

There is often a specific incident that catapults us into this wilderness, and it can come when we least expect it. For some, it may be a challenging idea submitted by a college professor who refuses to accede to our affiliative comfort zones, cajoling us to look at a previously unquestioned

worldview. It could be the jilting by a lover, or it could be the sorrow-filled air of a hospital room in which you find yourself questioning bedrock beliefs about God and life. It could be the uncertain drive home from work having been given the pink slip and a box to clear your things. It could be the pit in the stomach when one's best laid plans in life just don't work out.

Sooner or later, we all find ourselves in the wilderness, alone and famished for a morsel of certainty, only there is none to be had, and we are left with the echoes of our own questions about life, and its meaning and purpose.

But make no mistake, the questions come from within, and in one way or another, they have us doubting the very things we were raised on, including even our sense of belovedness, and self-criticism and self-doubt invariably replace the invincibility of youthful exuberance.

For Jesus, the questions worming their way into his ear were about running from his true identity, assenting to the wiles of this world rather than embracing the harder road of his messianic purpose. That he was there for forty days (which is the biblical way of saying a long time, or the fullness of time)

means that he struggled. He struggled mightily before coming out the other side with a clearer sense of purpose and resolve. From there, in Luke's fourth chapter, he goes directly to teach and heal, and proclaim the good news to the poor and the oppressed. What Rohr says is the third phase of life: Reorder.

When we find ourselves alone in the wilderness, chewing on the bitter root of unknowing, we have options: some will run quickly back to the affiliative order of phase one focused on self. The ego will preserve itself by refusing to ask the hard questions. It will refuse to rest in the land of uncertainty and paradox where the answers might be found. Only, it rarely works. The questions linger.

Occasionally, I will have someone in my office asking me, as a proxy for parents long-since gone, to just tell them what to believe. But it doesn't work that way. We can walk together, but your questions are yours, and mine are mine. The spiritual journey is the point, and like it or not, for most of us, it is in through the experience of suffering that we unfold into new growth, new awareness.

Some will entrench in the second phase of disorder, but shut down any of the self-

reflective work there, opting instead to see the world's problems and our own as caused by those people. Many spend a lifetime working for justice causes, seen as external problems, just to avoid the deep inner work at hand. Others get trapped in the wilderness when they see it only as a quagmire leading to inevitable cynicism, resignation, or despair.

The reason we hear this story of Jesus' wilderness experience every year as Lent begins is because we all have our version of the experience as well, and there is another path onto which we are invited. The mystic tradition invites us to consider the darkness of disorder in one's life, or the dark night of the soul, as a gift. The mystics are quick to point out that the dark night can come paradoxically as a place of spiritual transformation where just a glimmer of light is enough to give us the courage to take that next step, and then the next, and finally into the dawn of new awareness.

Folks, I know this is heavy stuff, and what I am naming here in this sermon I will unpack in much more detail the next three Wednesday evenings in the series I've entitled, An Invitation to Wisdom and Grace. I am convinced this is not just Lenten work, but the very work of the arc of life, if

we are to know where the journey of true identity is leading us.

When the psyche moves along this continuum, with courage, mingling the memory of our belovedness with the leavening gift of doubt in the wilderness,

then we can move into the realm of mystery and paradox, where apparent contradictions rest together and make sense, where compassion and forgiveness and mercy become our guideposts, where everything belongs, all are welcome, and the healing balm of God's good news lightens the way.

Luke 4:1-13 [*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.]*



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