



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 6, 2022

READINGS FOR 1 LENT, YEAR C INCLUDE:

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11; PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16; ROMANS 10:8-13; LUKE 4:1-13

WILDERNESS AS WORDLESS PLACE



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.*

One of the Hebrew words for “wilderness” in scripture literally means “the wordless place.” That piece of bible trivia captivated me this week as I pondered once more the meaning of Jesus’ time in the wilderness—the story we hear every year on this First Sunday in Lent.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all share their version—words spoken into our midst each year as we begin our journey to the desolate place of crucified hopes while trusting that the cross is not the final word.

Wilderness experiences are a part of life, whether they are forty years for the ancient Israelites, or forty days of spiritual quarantine for a famished Jesus, or forty hours or forty minutes or forty seconds. Forty is just the biblical word for a long time, the fulness of spiritual time it takes for whatever meaning to become audible to our parched souls.

I’ve always pictured this wilderness setting with Jesus and his temptations to be that scruff of Middle Eastern desert, reddish rocky crags broken open from the sandstone mountains that stand silent watch over the stretch of rugged land between Jericho and Jerusalem. The

soil is granular, gritty, sediment scoured loose by the occasional rainstorm and the relentless wind. The sort of dust that layers on a sweaty brow and works into the fabric of clothing and coats the nostrils and throat as dry, irritating residue.

But the image of wilderness as the wordless place brought me closer to home this week, to conjure the Hoh Rain Forest three hours west of here, a wilderness where Emmy-award winning acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton famously recorded his “one square inch of silence,” a place where no human development has invaded, and when no planes fly overhead, there is nothing but nature to speak into the vacuum of human noise which is the constant accompaniment for most of us.

The Hoh Forest is a unique wilderness, a gorge formed by one of eleven rivers radiating from the Olympic peaks above in its mythic trek to the sea. The mountains curtail storms blowing onshore, prompting them to dump their wet clouds into the forest that has staked its claim there. Hence, the rain forest designation.

Lichens form Grinch beards on soaring Douglas firs and more modest Big Leaf Maples;ⁱⁱ the air is damp and heavy, hushing sounds that would elsewhere become long-distance travelers; ferns and fungi liberate their spores by the quadrillions in a prehistoric dance that will feast on what has died on the forest floor as nutrient hope for the next generation. The ecosystem does its wild thing with fecund abandon. Humans are interlopers, and if one wanders into that wilderness, and really listens in the wordless space, they will gain a sense of wilderness...of silence...of the wordlessness of spiritual invitation to wrestle and wring meaning from the experience.

Hempton said we are evolved to listen to our surroundings, but the modern world has turned up the volume too loud and for too long. We may think we've acclimated, but the science says otherwise: stress hormones still surge in our bloodstreams. "Noise pollution shortens lives," he said. "It's the new second-hand smoke."ⁱⁱⁱ That is quite an image!

I would suggest it is also a statement with spiritual implications, and here on this First Sunday in Lent, when we are invited to step to

the fringes of Jesus' wilderness experience and just listen in, we are also invited to consider the wilderness experiences of our own lives, and what they may have to say to us as we make our way. What gets spoken and written onto our hearts may not come in the form of words as we know them. The language of the Spirit is much more nuanced, subliminal even, which is to say, crossing the threshold of new spiritual wisdom may require more than words; it may require more time, more intention, more contemplative silence, more wordless space, more reflection, more of less things for the meaning to surface. This is the invitation we receive each year in the observance of a holy Lent—to acknowledge that wilderness experiences are at once scary, disorienting, even destabilizing of the old order.

But they are also the place of spiritual breakthrough, new insights, discerned meaning. And scriptures remind us again today that we do not enter such wilderness alone, even if it may feel like that at times. God's spirit is there, always—sitting Shiva with us for as long as it takes to make sense of things; present for the fullness of time it took the Israelites to arrive home, for the length of time it took Jesus to

address his temptations and work out his messianic identity, for us as we ponder what it means to follow Christ in this cacophonous world.

The tradition of giving something up in Lent is rooted in this deeper ravine of wilderness experience. A place of Lenten fasting and prayer, if you will. If we are really honest, this place is not really about giving up chocolate for a few weeks; this is the place where wild things are and we instinctively know it, where the sheer dimensions of wildness demand our concession that we are not in control; where the feeling of desolation may give one the yips. It's a lot, this Lenten journey.

But the Spirit of God is present there with you and me, always. And we have the grace of God and living bread for sustenance; we have the credal promise of the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins; and we hold fast to the hope that this wilderness is not the end of the story, but a throughway, into something new, and infinitely more than we can describe with words on this side of the grave.^{iv}

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https://www.google.com/search?q=hoh+rain+forest&rlz=1C1CHZN_enUS941US941&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiJxJ30vaj2AhUCJDQIHbpNDzkQ_AUoAnoECAIQBA&biw=1384&bih=656&dpr=1.38#imgsrc=uUnj7xelCsBGwM

ⁱⁱ A great image from Amanda Castelman,
<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20150110-the-quietest-place-in-the-us>

ⁱⁱⁱ As quoted by Amanda Castleman,
<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20150110-the-quietest-place-in-the-us>

^{iv} Some exegetical themes are drawn from an essay in The Christian Century by Jennifer Moland-Kovash,
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-6-lent-1c-luke-41-13?code=9d1NpiXgGfx7TdJpoDo5>