

Wilderness Sunday (27 Aug 17)

Joel 1:8-10, 17-20;

Romans 8:22-27;

Psalm 18;

Mark 1:9-13

Common question: Why did the chicken cross the road? Less common question: Why did Jesus go out to the wilderness?

I suppose some answer: it was to prepare for the rest of his ministry, seeing this time in the wilderness as a spiritual boot camp or something, that he had to go do his Ignatian exercises to visualize conquering the rigors to come, or that this tempting by the devil was spiritual weight-lifting to get him honed and toned and ripped, ready and rearing to go.

In a related but more substantial sense, some see this time alone in the wilderness parallel to native American (and other indigenous peoples') practices of vision quests, a formative time of extraordinary experience in finding himself and coming back fully developed.

A totally different answer to the question "why did Jesus go out into the wilderness" is prompted by terms in the reading: he went because he didn't have a choice; the Holy Spirit drove him out. Compelled him. Or directly in the original Greek, he was *ek-balled*, thrown out. It's an interesting term, because when Jesus does exorcisms to get rid of the bad and unclean spirits, he is *ek-balling them*, throwing them out. But here the good Spirit, the Holy Spirit is reversing the process by *ek-balling* Jesus.

As Jesus gets exorcised from society, we could attribute wild explanations amid the Season of Creation and on Wilderness Sunday and looking for special meaning for non-human parts of the story. It could be, for all we attribute to civilization as marking positive progress, that instead city life contributes to our distance and separation from God, giving us

false senses of security and misperceptions of what is good or right.

So, like a person is restored to wellness when an unclean spirit is thrown out, from this *ek-balling* of Jesus, we might claim getting driven away from culture and back to the land, back to wilderness provides restoration of sanity, of spirituality, of our wholeness, healing us and our integrity, getting away from corruptions. We might also notice that out there in wilderness we have to face something so much more powerful and majestic than our small selves, which contributes to a better understanding of God.

That's an easy view of wilderness, and one that Jesus also seems to have persisted in as the story continues. Later on, he's not *forced* into the wilderness, but regularly flees up a mountain or out on a boat to pray, for quiet, to reconnect with God perhaps, or with his friends, to rest and rejuvenate when he's drained by the demands of trying to love people. I like those reasons for "getting away from it all," as we say, or maybe getting away from the constrained view of what our existence is. But more on that later.

There are also less "natural" explanations of why Jesus is driven to the wilderness. We might observe this is what baptism does to us: it gives us the assurance of connection with God, that you are called a beloved child of God, but then you're also thrown out of your regular rhythms and are trying to muddle through what this promise means for life. Figuring out faith may persistently feel like a wilderness experience of being not-quite lost and not-quite in place.

That also points to echoes of earlier scripture. Jesus is in the wilderness 40 days. That number and location probably should make us think of the Exodus from Egypt and waiting to enter the Promised Land. This is exactly the image that John the Baptizer was also trying to

foster, with the symbol of crossing through the waters of the Jordan River to live with renewed connection to God's promise. Well, Jesus becomes the embodiment of the faithful experience: like Moses and Miriam and the people who spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness waiting for fulfillment, Jesus parallels that wilderness experience in his 40 days, embodying God's commitment to bring God's people into the promise, a sign of godly new beginnings.

Or maybe instead of the whole Exodus account, it's a smaller portrait comparing Jesus to the prophet Elijah in the wilderness fleeing from enemies being renewed for another mission, another sending back *into* society. In his 40 days and nights out, he encountered God not in terrifying wilderness grandeur of fires and storms and tectonic shifts, but in the sound of silence, while the ravens were with him to bring him food. (1Kings17:6, 19:1-17)

That prompts the next important direction this morning. I really cherish the detail about ravens bringing Elijah food because amid that same drought there's a story about an angel that feeds Elijah. So I claim this gives reason to see black wise ravens as angels, as messengers and servants of God. That can feed into this gospel reading, too. Nothing says this is ladies with white wings and harps who are the angels who show up to be deacons to Jesus, to be waitresses serving him some food. It could've been crows.

For this transition, we have to adjust our sense of wilderness. Just like we have a rather confined image of angels, it's the same of wilderness. We picture large and foreign places—snow-capped peaks, acres of forest, caribou tundra, forbidding desert, remote island. Those and their inhabitants we see as wild. A crow or raccoon we see as not quite that. Though they may not be domesticated, not house-broken, they don't count as wild. We

draw this line that wild things and wilderness must be stranger, purer, further.

There's a line that hangs around national parks: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." It might fit parks and wilderness designations, that if we set aside those areas, and in sufficient quantity, then we'll have preserved or saved the world somehow. (Premier biologist E.O. Wilson says that's 1/2 of the planet for the survival of our species.\*)

The thing is, though, that quote comes from Henry David Thoreau. Not so much a wilderness warrior like Teddy Roosevelt roughing it or John Muir who on his two little feet "walked away into the mountains with his old overcoat and crust of bread in his pocket,"\*\* not some polar explorer or high adventurer, Thoreau is belittled for close proximity, that he only lived far enough away to make it home to see his mother. I read this week that Thoreau's ability was to "focus on the human need for freedom in the beauty of ordinary places...The scenes he describes are on a smaller scale than most wilderness writers. He finds epic drama and wildness in the...overlooked corners of life, ants and mice, for example... Thoreau's wild places...were his neighbor's apple orchards and berry patches."\*\*\*\*

So today let's expand our view of wilderness—or maybe I more precisely mean let's contract it, to find it not just in the wild west and the great outdoors, but in the small weed cracking through concrete and the birdsong through a car window and a houseplant. Those bits of wildness may be accessible and may be your preservation amid this world.

Beginning there also reorients another perspective: we're so trapped into seeing

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\* cited in Terry Tempest Williams *The Hour of Land*, p359

\*\* Greg Brown "Two Little Feet"

\*\*\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3-fh6cLypo>

\*\*\*\* <http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/Thoreau>

wilderness as other. Again, the U.S. legally defines it as places "untrammelled by man." But in this small world with its finite beauty and potential, we can no longer claim there are places on earth that *are* other, that are separate, unsullied, nor even that are bigger than we are.

In the Badlands, I wandered off into the official "wilderness" area, up slopes and down tight wash crevices, the sort of places we can imagine we're pioneers, the first to set foot there. But everywhere I turned and stretched to climb, I found a piece of litter. The best find was this ballcap. There was no place that was isolated or inaccessible or pure.

Whether with our probing personalities or the proliferation of our pollution, there are few places we don't find traces of ourselves. And as we change the climate, that soaks into soils and ocean deeps, into the wild diversity of coral reefs and under the bark of the forest. No place *is* untrammelled by man. Nor are humans separate from the wilderness any place, even in urban life: our weather cycles depend on ocean currents, the oxygen we breathe is breathed from the rainforest, we depend on the unexamined microbiotic systems in dirt.

So we need to see wilderness all around, because we're connected to it. That was the meaning I took from the prophet Joel, who observed that all welfare—or its reverse in despair and suffering—are interwoven, the priests in the temple, the farmers and their cattle, and the burning trees in the wilderness. In Joel's time, he was seeing that the sin, the fault, the failings of the people, and their lack of understanding in connection with God meant that there came a plague of locusts, seen even as a destroying army. In our time, we can easily frame this image as the repercussions of our burning fossil fuels, hurting ourselves, our livelihood, and life far from us.

But this connection is not only a matter of threat. As Jesus went to commune with the wild beasts (and since, after all, there is no venue or site separate from his presence and love), I don't want to leave you with the dire words of Joel, but pick up another better-known outlook from a prophet, seeing our bond with those same wild scenes, but looking toward God's goodness. Here from Isaiah (35) are words of encouragement and hope, driven by the Spirit, for you and for the groaning creation that is waiting for you:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

<sup>4</sup>Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God who will come and save you."

<sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

<sup>7</sup>the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

<sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of the LORD shall return with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

It is right to give you thanks, loving Creator.

Your word is the impulse  
for all things to be,  
for space, stars, and stardust to appear,  
for Earth to emerge from the deep,  
for life to be born of Earth,  
and for humans to be born of Earth and the Spirit.  
You chose human beings  
to be your servants on Earth,  
to care for our garden home;  
you suffered when they desecrated  
the Earth and its waters and lands.  
Your Spirit was the life impulse in all things,  
Restoring the broken and healing the wounded,  
groaning in anticipation of a new creation,  
stirring with new life born of water and the Spirit.  
You chose to be born a human being,  
to become a part of Earth,

to suffer, die, and rise from the dead  
to redeem humankind, restore creation,  
and reconcile all born of Earth and the Spirit.  
Your presence is the living power in all things,  
the Christ deep among us,  
filling Earth—land, sea and air—  
filling every element and place,  
filling the grain and the grape  
we share with you this day.  
Therefore with angels and archangels,  
saints and sinners,  
ancient voices in the forest,  
high voices from the sky,  
deep voices from the sea,  
and the whole company of creation,  
we proclaim your presence among us.

As the wilderness sings, we join our place amid your  
grand creation, with your delight in all that you have  
made, fields and mountains, oceans and deserts, far  
wilderness and our own efforts at civility.

We pray for those places that are distant from us, and  
pray also for places that are too affected by us, for those  
wild and foreign places that fill with our litter, that are  
trammled by our pollution, where the rhythms of life are  
syncopated by us. And in reverse, we pray for all who are  
suffering because of Hurricane Harvey and other disasters.

We give thanks for international cooperation to protect  
wildlife, for agreements that allow the migration of  
animals across borders even when the movement of  
humans is not allowed. We thank you for the Paris  
Agreement and the striving of almost all of this planet for  
preservation, prevention of catastrophe, for life. Still, we  
also pray where nations interfere with your work, in  
human lives and for the good of all. Give us peace.

Amid the hurting, we pray for endangered species  
threatened with extinction. We pray for all creatures who  
suffer. In our midst we remember: Jean Oliverson's  
sister Jan, Karen Cooke's husband Lane,  
Howard & Lucetta Kanetzke, Margaret  
Helming, Kathy and Robin Alexander. Mary  
Margaret Nack.

Thank you for the blessings of community, in  
this place and across the connections of

creation. We pray for those who are not with us  
this weekend, and for all whose lives are in  
transition, including Jackie McGinley, who  
moves to Boston to start PA (Physician  
Assistant) school, as well as our departing  
college students.

We give thanks for Larry Henning's 30<sup>th</sup>  
anniversary of ordination.