

Wilderness is not a Detour
Sermon for 2/21/21
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“You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.” Words beaming in as a voice from heaven to Jesus in his baptism, and words for you, too. To help you imagine this scene of Jesus’ baptism by his cousin, John the Baptizer in the Jordan River, you can see behind me the Jordan River winding through the Judean wilderness around it. John was said to be appearing and baptizing in this rugged and dangerous wilderness region with a prophetic message of salvation and hope - preparing the way for the Messiah, who was Jesus. And imagine this scene at the Jordan River, which was really the launching point of Jesus’ ministry with the heavens breaking apart and the Spirit descending like a dove. It sounds like a fairly remarkable, holy kind of event to be taking place in the unlikely, lowly place such as this. Not in the temple or a typical sacred, high space but in the waters of the Jordan River, which flows into the Dead Sea, the lowest elevation on earth. And this river carried special meaning for the Hebrew people who had journeyed out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness and crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land.

And immediately after this baptism where Jesus is blessed and called beloved, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness. Wait, what??? That’s weird. Doesn’t he have preaching, healing, and teaching to get to? What is going on here with Jesus being driven, sent by the Spirit into the rugged and dangerous wilderness, away from towns, villages, people, and communities that need to experience and hear his message? This

kind of seems like some sort of crazy detour as He is thrust out here into this unpredictable, barren land to wander alone for 40 days.

Jesus wandering around in this wilderness land in Judea reminds me a little of a journey into the Rocky Mountains of Colorado that I did about 6 years ago. I was actually driven by the Spirit to help lead a high wilderness backpacking trip with middle and high school youth from our congregation in Lodi. We ventured out on the week-long trip from Sky Ranch Lutheran Camp, which sits at 9,200 ft. in northern Colorado. I was actually really excited for this adventure, having been on the staff of Sky Ranch back in the 90's and having some awesome memories of hiking through the mountains. As we were getting ready to head out from the camp and into the wilderness, we heard that there could be some rain showers throughout that week in mid-July. No big deal - I knew that rain typically came and went pretty quickly most days in the mountains. What we ended up experiencing that week was far from typical. Dark and ominous skies, torrential rains, lightning and thunder for hours, temperatures dipping into the 30's at night. We were soaked and cold much of the week. Sleeping was next to impossible when there was so much shivering during the nights. This was just a very hard experience to be having, in what was supposed to be an amazing time in the wilderness. But wilderness is just that...wild, untamed, unpredictable, sometimes chaotic. Nothing in our power could change that, and we felt completely unable to control our experience. But hope did come in the midst of all that challenge. On the first day, my husband Mike hiked out 8 miles to meet our group and bring me the rain poncho that I had forgotten. Anytime there was a short break in the clouds and the sun shone briefly down on us, we danced for joy. And I will never forget our whole group

huddling close together in a circle in one small tent to warm and cheer each other up. I remember having ironically packed a book to read called, Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbara Brown Taylor, which is all about befriending the dark and recognizing the gifts that can come in difficult or painful times. The words on the water-soaked pages sprung out at me as I wrestled with the dark, challenging experience this was. I remember reading, "I have learned things in the dark that I never could have learned in the light and new life starts in the dark, and thinking huh...perhaps there is something sacred going on here and we are not abandoned. Our journey through the mountains brought us safely back to camp, with stories to tell and lessons learned that were far deeper than we could have imagined.

Some might say, I choose to play it safe, I reduce my risk of being out of control, and do my best to manage my days so that I don't have to find myself in real or figurative experiences of wilderness. But how well does that work out? More often than not, we don't have to go out and find the wilderness. Wilderness finds us. An unexpected diagnosis, a job loss, conflict in your family, mental illness, storms that bring rain, snow, ice, and power loss, not to mention a global pandemic. So, here we all are in 2021. In a wilderness that we would have much rather avoided. Surely, this is not how life is supposed to be. This is not what we bargained for. We are supposed to be together in worship right now and doing the ministry that we know and love. We should be free and able to live our lives as they were intended. But wilderness happens. We can't deny that there is a wildness to this life that we share.

So, the ministry of Jesus being rooted in the experience of wilderness was part of a larger history of this reality. The Israelites knew that the journeying and wandering

through the wilderness for 40 years and the time of exile in Babylon was crucial to their identity and revealed the steadfast love and mercy of God in a way they might not have known otherwise. The Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness remained with him, breathed life into him. The passage says “Angels waited on him.” And Jesus went on from his time in the wilderness to proclaim the good news to live and breathe with that Spirit as the Kingdom of God unfolded through him. This same Spirit remains with you and I and all of creation, here and now. Yes, just like Jesus, you have been blessed and called into this life, beloved children of God. Your journey is part of our journey that we share as people who call ourselves Jesus followers. We follow in this way of Jesus, even as we find ourselves in wilderness moments, days, months, or years. You are never abandoned or forsaken, no matter where you find yourself. You are never lost, even if you wander. The Spirit is breathing into you, angels wait on you. People, believe in this good news: we are on the way, always, always being guided forward by the Spirit of love and mercy in this Kingdom of God that continues to unfold in and through and around us. Amen.

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