

February 18, 2018
Mark 1:9-15
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“Where is Your Wilderness?”

Good morning! This is the first Sunday of Lent. In case you need some review and a little context, Lent is the forty days before Easter -- no including Sundays -- that puts Easter on April 1st this year. Easter was the first holiday observed by the early church (way before they started to have Christ Mass on December 25th), and the forty days before Easter were the time when those people interested in joining the church had an intensive time of instruction and orientation prior to being baptized into new life in Christ on Easter Sunday.

The number forty is not entirely arbitrary -- you can probably think of other groupings of forty in the Bible: it rained for forty days and forty nights on Noah and the ark; the children of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years after being freed from slavery in Egypt. Forty is kind of Jewish shorthand for “a whole lot,” or “a long time.” This forty days of Jesus in the wilderness is another in this series of biblical forties, and big reason that Lent is forty days long. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all give an account of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, and they all report that Jesus was there for forty days. Mark is the shortest gospel -- it was the first one written -- Matthew and Luke add more details: more specifics about the ways in which Jesus was tempted and how he responded. Matthew and Luke also both note something that isn’t included in Mark’s account: that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days without food before he was tempted.

Sometimes, like in the song we just sang, “Jesus Tempted in the Desert” the words wilderness and desert are used interchangeably. That makes sense, because for Jesus, and anyone else living in Palestine or the Middle East, the wilderness was a desert. There were huge tracts of land that looked like this **Slide 1 Rocky, scrubby, arid,**

hot during the day and freezing at night. There are still large areas in the Middle East that look like this -- it's only since modern hydraulic technology and irrigation that communities have spread away from rivers or oases.

You can see how being in a wilderness like this would shape ideas about God and spirituality and what's important in life. It's no accident that throughout the Bible, *water* is a symbol of what is nourishing and life-giving. John 4 talks about living water that becomes a spring of eternal life within us. Without water, we cannot live. Although the desert may be beautiful, it's harsh and empty and given to extremes. The earliest monastic communities and promoters of Christian spirituality were the Desert Fathers and Mothers, folks who left settled areas and went to live in caves in the desert, where they lived in isolation and extreme conditions with very little food, water, or other comforts. This ascetic tradition made a virtue out of giving up possessions, food, human contact, sleep and about everything else that most people strive for. Because of these gospel stories of Jesus in the wilderness, some parts of the Christian Church developed practices of fasting -- or giving up food -- during Lent. Most people don't give up food entirely, as Jesus did, but you're probably familiar with Lenten practices -- or maybe for you it was a Lenten expectation -- of eating fish on Fridays, or giving up chocolate -- or alcohol, or tobacco -- for Lent.

I'm not here to speak against any of those practices of fasting. But any practices which is someone else telling you that you have to do has a way of devolving into legalism, and we get lost in conversations deciding whether the little piece of fat in the can of baked beans you opened on Friday counts as eating meat. We lose sight of the forest and get lost in the trees. I know that what I'm proposing for Lent at Creekside is my idea, and I can't make you do it, but I want to elaborate on what is in the Lenten booklets and make a case for spiritual practices for you to create for yourself this Lent.

First of all, the wilderness -- especially in the Bible -- is not merely a place of suffering and deprivation and misery. The wilderness is the place where we encounter God. Not every wilderness is a desert, but the wilderness nearly always takes us away from the familiar and the comfortable, even if we don't go very far from home. **Slide 2** I grew up

in Southern California, and within several hours, we could drive to a wilderness that was hot and dry and spacious. This was the place that my family went to for camping and stargazing and to get away from the pollution and noise and demands of the suburbs.

If you grew up or spent time in the Pacific Northwest, your wilderness probably looks more like this **Slide 3** This is the northern Cascades in Washington State. It's beautiful, but it has its hazards. You probably won't die of thirst out here, but you can easily get lost, or get caught in an unexpected storm -- maybe even a snow storm -- and there are large animals out here: some of which eat meat and have sharp pointy teeth. One of the ways we encounter God is putting ourselves someplace which is not comfortable or entirely safe.

Slide 4 Maybe your wilderness looks like this. There is plenty that is not safe about a setting like this, especially if it's unfamiliar to you. And although we usually think of a wilderness as a place where we're alone, one of the loneliest places can be in a crowd of people that we don't know. It could be a waiting room or a hospital room or someplace where you're expecting news that you may not want to hear.

This Lenten season, I'll be talking about spiritual practices which developed and flourished in a place which looks like this. **Slide 5** This is Ireland; an island country which is about the size of Indiana: damp, overcast, green, and half a world away from the deserts of the Middle East. Christianity reached here fairly early: in the late 4th and early 5th centuries -- the same time the Desert Fathers were doing their ascetic thing. If you can imagine Christian practices developing differently here, you'd be right. Of course the text from John 4 about water springing up to eternal life is still true, but water is not scarce here; rain, fog, streams -- evidence that that God waters the earth and nourishes us is everywhere. The Christian story doesn't change, but the way we express it in the context of our culture and geography and practice can be different.

This Celtic context -- the countries of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, where Christianity developed outside of the Roman Church -- developed Christian practices which were more about affirming the goodness of life than they were about self-denial. Because there were

not huge deserts to withdraw to, Celtic monks developed an awareness of God in everyday life and found their wilderness in personal reflection and solitude. I know this is an over-simplification, but instead of the self-denial of the Desert Tradition, which I characterize as *fasting*, what I'm inviting us to this Lent is the Celtic tradition of everyday awareness, prayer and solitude which I'm calling *slowing*.

Let me say a word of caution here: slowing isn't easy. The concepts aren't complicated, but any discipline takes -- well, discipline. Every practice takes practice. Like anything else, some folks will be more naturally inclined to some practices than others. Slowing is not a goal in itself: the goal of any Christian practice is to increase our awareness of God and to deepen our relationship with Christ. It isn't a contest to see who can go the slowest or pray the most or whatever. But in order to try it, you have to actually *try it*. I know that some of you have practices like this already -- God bless you. Please keep doing the prayer practices you have, and praying for members and friends of Creekside. But consider adding something more. I'm encouraging all of us to try a practice of daily prayer and a practice of weekly solitude at least until Easter. I'll be talking about it more, and there are specifics in the Lent booklets, and deacon groups will be getting together to share and support one another. I can't guarantee how it will go for you; what I can say with certainty is that God meets us wherever we are and accepts us wherever we are, and that although we may not experience anything earth-shattering, no genuine effort to nourish and enrich our relationship with God is ever wasted effort. I haven't tried to propose anything which will put you in danger, but one of the ways which we encounter God is to allow ourselves to go places which are uncomfortable. Sometimes alone with our own thoughts can feel more vulnerable than being in the desert. Wherever your wilderness is, I encourage you to be kind to yourself and to others.

Slide 6 I'd like to end with one more image that you'll be seeing through Lent. Like the cross on the worship table, this is a Celtic cross, or a wheel cross. There are many variations, but what makes these crosses distinctive is the circle which surrounds the intersection point of the cross. Contemporary Celtic theologian J. Philip Newell says that this circle represents the sun and the light of

God's creation: the cross, the symbol of Christ and his crucifixion and victory over death, comes from the same center as creation. Christ was present in the work of creation, and Christ's work is for the redemption of the world and all creation. The knot work on the arms of the cross shows us that the Divine is woven throughout the earthly: Creator and Creation are both part of what weaves our lives together. Christ was both human and Divine, all humans are made from dust and given life through the breath of God. God's work is present in earth and water, wind and stillness. God's Spirit is the mystery which holds the stuff of our lives together.

You'll notice something about the placement of the cross in the photo: it's outside. Many of the most sacred places to Celtic Christians were outdoors: hill tops, springs of water, ancient trees. It's going to be more practical for us to be inside on Sunday mornings in February and March, but we'll do our best to set this table with some things which suggest that we are outside, which reflect the lengthening of days, and the growth which we associate with spring. As you make your way to and from Creekside, and the other activities through Lent, pay attention to how nature is growing and changing. Creation shows us the glory of God. We will let the cross be our guide into the heart of Creation, and as we follow Jesus.

Blessings on your week as we begin the Lenten journey of following Jesus and growing closer to God; may you encounter God in whatever wilderness you find yourself -- or lose yourself. Amen.