

Food in the Wilderness

Genesis 9:8ff and Mark 1:9-15

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Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."



Today's sermon is entitled "**Food in the Wilderness**". The wilderness aspect is easily recognized from the Gospel lesson. The food reference needs some explanation. Let me start with a personal story. Yesterday was my grandson, Seymour's 8th birthday. To celebrate we went to a restaurant to have lunch. The restaurant is in Chinatown in Seattle. It is a Dim Sum restaurant, where they serve food off of trays. I have always been shy of these places thinking that I will order too many dishes of things that I will not like and spend more money than have planned to spend. But things went very well. In fact I had a wonderful time, trying the different foods and watching my grandchildren enjoy themselves. This was food in the wilderness, nourishment in a place different from my usual hangouts.

Today, on this first Sunday in the Season of Lent, we have two Bible stories for our lessons.

The first is the conclusion of a mythic saga that tells a portion of how and why things are the way they are. The story of Noah, so often used as a children's bible lesson (it is not a story for kids!), ends with a promise from God: "I will not do this again." After making this promise, God places a bow, a weapon of war, in the sky both to show the people what God will do and, more importantly, to remind God what God has promised.

The second story is a three-parter.

- 1) Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan.
- 2) Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he is tested.
- 3) Jesus returns from the desert, and begins his ministry with the announcement that the time of God is at hand.

Each of these parts deserves our attention and our engagement. Because of time restraints, I choose to lift up the wilderness portion, especially as we are beginning the season of Lent.

The wilderness is not a camping trip with the family. It is not vacation time. (Please refer to the back of today's bulletin for more information about the wilderness)

Wilderness is not just a place. It is a part of life that is always with us. It is not a bad place, i.e., a place to be avoided, like a "bad neighborhood" or a war zone. It just "is." Sometimes we are thrust into the wilderness, as, it would seem, Jesus was. Sometimes we go there on our own, called by something or someone within ourselves. The mystics in our tradition call the wilderness, the "dark night of the soul." John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic of the Catholic Reformation, wrote a book called the "Dark Night of the Soul" in which he says:

"Therefore, such a soul finds its delight in spending long periods—perchance whole nights—in prayer; penances are its pleasures; fasts its joys; and its consolations are to make use of the sacraments and to occupy itself in Divine things."

Obviously, not all Christians are "called" to visit the wilderness in this way. Divine vocation takes many paths. The more common path is in the world, the regular secular life. But still, the wilderness is with us even there.

One way I have experienced the wilderness and observed it in others is in the way we deal with suffering. You name it: a loved one dies, we come down with a terrible illness, we experience betrayal in our relationships, injustice of one kind or another restricts our freedom.

I have found the wilderness to be a place where these realities are laid bare and, in the language of the African American spiritual: *"You've got to walk that lonesome valley; you've got to walk it by yourself. Ain't nobody else can walk it for you. You've got to walk it by yourself."*

Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. I like to think this was his training for ministry. He had to experience his own "dark night of the soul" before he

could look into the eyes of the leper, the beggar, the tax collector, the blind man, the woman bent over, the woman with the constant bleeding, the Roman guard, and, even, Pontius Pilate. I like to think he went deep down to the bottom of human experience and came back with the tools –divine love and compassion – that would bring salvation and healing to the whole world.

Each of us has to walk the lonesome valley of life. Each of us has wilderness time in front of us or all around us. I am here to say that we have food to sustain us on our wilderness journey. We need food. We need nourishment, even as we experience the benefits of fasting – of going without something important in order to realize its importance or the importance of the One who gives it.

The food for the wilderness I want to talk about is real simple. I call it promise, gratitude, and breath.

The promise is the covenant given to us by God as symbolized by the bow in the sky, the rainbow. Without any work or effort or merit on our part, God has promised to care for us, to look after us, to give us what we need to survive. God has promised to continue being the active Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Nothing we have done or can do will deny this promise. We can take it to the bank. We can feast on it in the wilderness.

The second course is gratitude. Gratitude is a posture we take on when we see what God has done for us, what God has promised us and how God has continued to add to God's promise with more blessing. We are grateful for the unconditional love we recognize in the person of Jesus, who walked the lonesome valley in such a unique way that we may find abundant life for ourselves and our world by walking the same way.

And the third course of food I lift up is breath. Take a deep breath, everyone. The breath we receive right now keeps us alive and, what is more, offers us a chance to change our lives, to turn ourselves away from evil or despair or hopelessness and walk in new ways. Take this breath and feel it enter your bodies as a gift. Take this next breath and let it remind you that that all is not lost, a new day and a new way is possible, by God's grace.

So, you see. We have the nourishment we need for this wilderness journey upon which we all travel. Guten Appetit. Amen.