



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

1st Sunday in Lent: February 18, 2018

Sermon Title: "The Wilderness"

Sermon Text: Mark 1:9-15

On this first Sunday in Lent, we follow Jesus into the wilderness. Holy tradition tells us that our Gospel lesson took place near Jericho, in eastern Israel, in a vast, sandy desert, devoid of vegetation, with harsh winds, a beating sun, and steep, craggy mountains that angrily stab the sky. I've been there, at the foot of the Mount of Temptation. If any place on earth can be called "God forsaken," this is it.

Mark, with his trademark brevity, omits much of the detail Matthew and Luke include in their much lengthier descriptions of Jesus's wilderness experience, like the elaborate dialogue of dueling scripture passages between Jesus and Satan. Instead, what Mark offers us is so sparse. So real. So raw. So lonely. Just Jesus in that hot, sandy, unrelenting desert wilderness, surrounded by wild beasts and tempted by Satan.

Why was Jesus there? Why did he have to endure this brutal time in the wilderness? Mark doesn't offer an explicit answer. But he does provide a few clues. First, we know it wasn't an accident that Jesus was in this desolate wilderness. The Spirit drove him there. This was very much a spiritual journey, initiated by God. Mark's other clue comes from this story's placement. It occurs immediately *following* Jesus's baptism, and immediately prior to the start of his public ministry. This tells me that Jesus's experience in the wilderness was a critical milestone in his life - a transformational moment. It was a time for him to sort through exactly who and whose he was, and a place for wrestling with vitally important questions of identity, mission, and purpose.

The wildernesses we walk through look much different than the one Jesus occupied, but ours are no less terrifying or challenging than his. And just like his, they involve essential questions of identity, mission, and purpose. Throughout every stage of life – as teenagers, young adults starting careers, people in their middle years simultaneously caring for children and aging parents, and as folks facing retirement, health crises, or the loss of a loved one, we struggle to make sense of who we are. You know all about these wildernesses. Some of you are in one right now.

There is no easy roadmap for navigating them, and no easy answers. Nevertheless, our wilderness, like that of Jesus, is holy ground. It is a place of opportunity, not punishment. It is a time of transformation, not humiliation. It is a time for us to sort out who and whose we are. And so you can boldly enter that daunting but sacred space, because there the angels *are* tending *you* in the midst of your transformation, just as they tended Jesus.

Still, wouldn't it be nice if we could just avoid those wildernesses? Maybe in the short run – yes – but in the long run we would miss an important gift. One of my spiritual heroes, a Frenchman named Charles de Foucauld, once wrote that to experience God's grace in its fullness, "you must go to a desert place and stay a while. There you can be emptied and unburdened of everything that does not pertain to God. There the house of our soul is swept clean to make room for God alone to dwell."¹ I've found this to be true in my life, and I suspect it's true in yours as well. I believe it was true for Jesus too. The wilderness experience clarifies our identity by shaping our character and pruning away the non-essential aspects of our life so that the essential things can thrive. That process can be summed up in one brief question: *Who am I?*

I think this was the very question that tormented Jesus. I can almost hear Satan hissing in Jesus's ear: "Mary's son – what makes you think *you* can change the world? Look at you, living your quiet, humble, carpenter's life in Nazareth. You are as irrelevant as your hometown. Give up! *You are nothing.*" But I can likewise imagine Satan saying, "Son of God – you are all-powerful. You don't need to play by the rules. Why be burdened and bothered by these worthless mortals? *You owe them nothing!*"

A Nazi jail cell was the wilderness of Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a well-educated man of privilege, a gifted scholar, writer, academic, teacher, and pastor. Life could have gone very smoothly for Bonhoeffer, but this man of God knew that he had to boldly step from his comfort zone to stand against Hitler. Eventually, his work on behalf of the German resistance was discovered and he was arrested.

While imprisoned, Bonhoeffer wrote a poem that described his wilderness struggle with identity. And as you might guess, it was entitled "Who am I?". Listen to a few lines: "Who am I? They often tell me I stepped from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a Squire from his country house, like one accustomed to win. Am I then really that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I myself know of myself? Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath... thirsting for words of kindness... weary and empty at praying... and ready to say farewell to it all. Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine." And then Bonhoeffer closed with this remarkable line: "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!"

Somewhere in that prison wilderness of World War 2 Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer received the clarity of purpose, vision, and identity he so longed to possess. Listen to what the camp doctor wrote about Bonhoeffer on April 9, 1945, the day of his execution: "[That] morning... I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently... I was most deeply moved by the way [he] prayed, so devout and so certain that God hears his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In... almost fifty years... as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."² Another man recorded Bonhoeffer's parting words as he walked to the gallows: "This is the end - for me, the beginning of life."³

Jesus too would exit his wilderness, at peace, fully prepared for a death he knew he *could* avoid. But Jesus – fully secure in his identity - would freely walk to his cross knowing exactly who he was. This child of Mary – this Son of God – would graciously pour out his life for us. The most powerful man in the cosmos would win an astonishing victory over sin, death, and the devil, not through powerful armies or the force of a massive ego but by humble service, gentle submission, and love... So much love that it was not only his primary *tool*, but his very *identity*.

This Lent, the Spirit isn't driving you into a desert or a prison cell, or calling you to physical death. But the Spirit is drawing you into a spiritual wilderness, and the death of those things that attempt to separate you from Jesus by obscuring your true identity. *Who are you?* Maybe you're in top physical shape and the peak of your career. You've got life figured out; you don't think you need God. On the other hand, maybe you're struggling with confidence, declining mental or physical health, the loss of a loved one, or a persistent sin. You feel insignificant and unworthy of God's love. In truth, *neither* of these two extremes accurately describe who you really are. You are a *child of God*, fallible for sure, but unconditionally *loved* by God and unquestionably *forgiven* by God. Hold on to *that* identity as you walk the holy ground of your wilderness, accompanied by angels and Jesus himself. Confidently follow in his footsteps of humble service and gentle submission, and emerge from your wilderness in peace, with clarity of purpose and identity. Be transformed *by* love. And be transformed *into* love. Amen.

Citations:

¹ B. Thurston, *Hidden in God: Discovering the Desert Vision of Charles de Foucauld* (© 2016, p. 68).

² E Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (© 2000, pp. 927-928).

³ *Ibid*, p. 927.