

Lent 1 - 2021

Wilderness, here we are. On this first Sunday of Lent, the texts thrust us immediately into the wilderness. To start, we read the story of God's promise to Noah after the flood. This carries with it hope and promise. In the Epistle, we see Jesus preaching to spirits in prison from Noah's day—a statement no one is quite sure how to explain. And of course, from Mark's Gospel, we have the baptism of Jesus with the sky torn open, a heavenly voice, and then the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness.

When Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan, we go down with him, and are raised back up with him. When Jesus is driven into the wilderness, we are driven there with him. When Jesus dies upon the cross, we die with him. His life becomes our life.

Now we are oriented towards Lent, entering our own wilderness. As people we are challenged to enter into our own darkness, taking with us the experience of the Epiphany, to navigate and grow into the wilderness of our sin and shame. Into this season we carry the faith that even our worst attributes can be transformed by God into something beautiful and worthwhile.

While the story of the hope and promise after the flood is a turning backward, it may also be a turning forward to hope. There is a shift in humanity after the flood. There is a substantive change. These are people who have been saved. These are people who are beloved. No matter who they are or where they go from there, the fundamental part of their identity remains that they are people who have been rescued.

Baptism is also a turning backward. It is a turn toward suffering and even toward death. It is a turning backward at the wilderness we have come

from, individually and as humanity. It is a sign of a fundamental change of identity. It is a sign that we are rescued, cleansed, and made new.

If we are being honest with ourselves, we can sometimes try our best to avoid the wilderness. Things happen in the wilderness and we would rather not have things change. Amidst this season of fasting, of praying and of preparing the way, we may be tempted to simply go through the motions. We may be inclined to skirt the wilderness, to be circling around the peripheral edges, to turn away from encountering God in the wild places that Christ did not refuse to suffer in. But if we are to follow Jesus, if we are to be renewed for new possibilities and prepared to hope once more, we must face the wilderness of our own sin, the depths of our brokenness in the light of the glory of His righteousness.

I believe each one of us encounters our own beasts in the wilderness, that signify to us the depths of our despair. Each of us are uniquely vulnerable to our own beasts of the wilderness. Temptation comes

almost searching us out, knowing who we are in Christ but choosing to call us out by our sin rather than by our names. In this way, facing temptation in the wilderness is somewhat like a mirror, drawing a clarifying picture for us of our nature and our pressing, serious, undeniable need for the mercy of God.

Let each one of us then find God mighty to save; through Jesus Christ our Lord. God is “the God of our salvation.” The God who is God of the waters and the mighty floods descended into the dark depths and full breadth of human suffering for us. Now, we find our identity in Christ. Christ has been there, is there, and always will be there.

As we enter this season, we see the wilderness around us. We see the wilderness we’ve walked through. And we know there’s still wilderness yet to come. Yet we hold onto our identity in Christ, who knows all of our sin but still calls us by our names. The identity of being marked as Christ’s own forever. Christ is with you. Christ is for you.

This is the call of Lenten repentance: Come to the wilderness with Christ and see who you are, and take the time to name and confront your individual temptations and wild beasts. Be watchful in that of the hand of God sustaining you, and remember joyfully and faithfully the mark of baptism that underpins your Christian life. When Easter arrives, we may then be all the more ready to proclaim with a loud voice the good news of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ.

“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”