

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 20, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 3:13-4:2](#)

Copyright © 2020 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

I've gone to a blank screen because I would like to begin this sermon in your imaginations. You may even want to shut your eyes because I would like to begin the sermon by inviting you to examine the image that comes up in your mind when I say the word *wilderness*. Notice what you see.

And now notice what *feelings* come up for you as you see this image of wilderness. Are they feelings of calm or foreboding? Of peace or of danger? Of adventure or of burden? Of richness or of loneliness?

Thank you.

In addition to a great variety of images and feelings connected with *wilderness*, people have all kinds of spiritual associations with the word. For many people, the word *wilderness* is connected to spiritual dryness, of feeling spiritually abandoned, of spiritual desolation. For others, *wilderness* is connected to spiritual nourishment, of spiritual intimacy, of spiritual consolation. For others, *wilderness* has neutral spiritual connotations; it is simply another part of creation, another place where one can be.

I can't help but wonder if our associations with the concept of *wilderness* are predicated on both our past experiences with wildernesses and our current experiences that have brought us into a time in the wilderness. If your past experiences of the wilderness – literal and figurative – are of deserts and scrublands, of scorpions and absence of life, of thirst and an unbearably hot sun, that may drive your spiritual associations. In the same way, if your past experiences of the wilderness are of forests of green lushness, of deer and herons, of still waters and life struggling forth, that may drive your spiritual associations, too, albeit in a different direction.

In a similar way, if you are currently experiencing a time in the wilderness, the reason you are there may well influence your emotional and spiritual associations. For the migrant crossing the Sonoran Desert, hoping to find refuge in the United States, the wilderness can be a place of danger, of danger that is perhaps only slightly smaller than the dangers that drove her to flee from her home. For the pastor on sabbatical wondering on a day-hike up a hill by himself in the Grand Tetons National Park, the wilderness can be a place of awe, filled with wonder and joy.

If depression has driven you into an emotional wilderness, if the dark night of the soul has driven you into a spiritual wilderness, it may be hard to find the green pastures and still waters that restore the soul there. If contentment has invited you to explore unexplored emotions, if meditation has invited you onto uncharted spiritual seas, you may find that every bush is filled with beautiful, sweet blueberries and the sailing is brisk and exhilarating.

I would suggest, and this probably won't surprise you, that the wilderness is a both/and. Whether we're talking about the physical wilderness, the emotional wilderness, or the spiritual wilderness, the wilderness is a place of both danger and safety, a place of both loneliness and intimacy, a place of both dryness and nourishment.

I associate two biblical stories with the wilderness. The first is the one that just started to unfold in our scripture reading today. What we heard takes place in the wilderness, but a wilderness that is filled with people. Crowds have come out to the wilderness by the Jordan River to see and hear John the Baptizer. Jesus, too, goes into this wilderness to be baptized by John. After the exchange between the two of them about whether or not it is appropriate for John to be baptizing Jesus, John relents. And as Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism, he sees the Holy Spirit descending from on high like a dove swooping down and landing on him. And he hears a voice from the heavens, the voice of the Holy One saying, "This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This is a wilderness experience filled with joy and affirmation. If this is what all wilderness experiences would be like, I would call out to God, asking for more and more and more. But we turned the page from chapter 3 in Matthew's gospel to chapter 4, and that same Spirit of God that alighted on Jesus, that opened his ears to hear God speak words of affirmation and love – that same Spirit drives Jesus deeper into the wilderness.

Deeper in the wilderness, things change. Deeper in the wilderness, Jesus must face the tempter. Fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, famished, Jesus wrestles with what it means to be God's child, God's beloved, one in whom God is well pleased. The specifics of that wrestling match, the specific ways the tempter lures Jesus away from his true self are not important for this sermon. What's important for us today is to recognize that for Jesus, the wilderness was a place of both fulfillment and temptation, a place of both affirmation and doubt.

The other biblical story I associate with the wilderness is the story of the Exodus. It is impossible to pick one short passage that encompasses this saga, this story that is central to the identity of Judaism. What sense would it make to tell only about the miracle water from a rock without the story of the escape at the Red Sea? What sense would it make to tell about the giving of the law at Sinai without the story of the call of Moses at the burning bush? I must rely on your general knowledge of the Exodus story today.

The Exodus takes place in the wilderness. The Hebrews, enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Egyptian economic system, struggled for their freedom. Under the leadership of Moses and with the help of God, they demanded and found freedom. Their first step into freedom was a step into the wilderness. And there they wandered for 40 years.

Just as Jesus spent his 40 days in the wilderness coming to a better understanding of who he was, the Hebrews spent 40 years in the wilderness coming to a better understanding of who they were. Their identity, for generations, had been wrapped up with a single label: slaves. And that was now the one thing that they were not. Led by God who was manifest by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, they needed to understand who they had become.

40 years is a long time to wander in the wilderness. The story is filled with drama, as the people cope with the hardships of the wilderness and the hardships of forming community. The wilderness for the Hebrew people was both a place of freedom and a place of hard work.

It wasn't until I was listening to a story on NPR about Ruth Bader Ginsburg yesterday morning that an additional line in scripture popped into my head, a line that, in retrospect, I wondered by I hadn't thought of it before: "A voice crying out in the wilderness." It's a line that comes at the beginning of chapter 3 in Matthew's gospel, right before Matthew describes Jesus' baptism and the wilderness aftermath of the baptism. It seems so obvious to me now, and so appropriate in this time of pandemic, racial reckoning, climate crisis, and electioneering.

The past six months have felt like a wilderness to me. Though I have not been completely cut off from civilization, I have felt separated from family and friends. More and more white folk are awakening to the ongoing racial crisis in our country, awakening to how the economic and justice systems of our nation leave some safely sheltered and other out in a violent wilderness. As more and more people are being forced to cope with the consequences of the climate crisis – through wildfires, windstorms, hurricanes, and flooding – we are seeing that the literal wilderness is happy to come right inside our homes.

When a lion for equality and justice for all under the law dies, when we lose the voices of John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, it is important for all of us to remember that we are descendants of prophets and we have an obligation to speak for those who have no voice.¹ In the wildernesses of our days, we need – the world needs – every voice for justice, every voice for freedom, every voice for the stewardship of the earth to cry out.

There was a time in the history of the United States when some department of the federal government included in its annual reports the number of acres of wilderness that had been subdued. I don't remember where I learned this factoid, so I can't go look it up to see which department it was (though the Department of the Interior is my prime suspect) or if that was the actual word used in these reports. I just know it was close to that – how many acres of the wilderness had been tamed, domesticated, subdued. The wilderness was seen as something to be overcome.

On this third Sunday of the Season of Creation, I invite us to see the wilderness as a place of blessing to be protected (not subdued), as a place where the din of civilization might be left long enough to allow the ever-present Holy One to be at work in us, to allow us to hear our still speaking God.

John Muir is quoted in a book published in 1911 as saying this about hiking: "I don't like either the word or the thing. People ought to saunter in the mountains – not hike! Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter'?" It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, 'A la sainte terre,' 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers.

¹ I wish I could remember who I'm paraphrasing here.

Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them."²

The veracity of both the story and the etymology are suspect. And even if both are wrong, I don't care. The sentiment is right. The wilderness is Holy Land through which we should be saint-terre-ers. For not all who wander are lost.

Amen.

² Albert Palmer, *The Mountain Trail and its Message*, 1911 (p.27), quoted in "John Muir and 'Saunter'," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/columns/post/john-muir-and-'saunter'> (posted 26 October 2019; accessed 19 September 2020).