

“Wilderness Encounter”  
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Matt 4:1-11

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San Dimas Community, United Church

I looked back at previous sermons in which I’d preached on this text, and in those sermons I’d focused on Jesus’ experience in the wilderness, but today I decided to take some time to talk about the encounters in the wilderness that are inherent to all of us because we are human beings.

As a pastor, I am sometimes privileged to hear about the encounters in the wilderness that people experience, and these wilderness encounters are also holy encounters. You see, holy encounters (which we spoke of last week on Transfiguration Sunday) are not all glory and light. Holy encounters often take us to the depths of wilderness; they strip us bare; they expose our vulnerabilities; but they also offer opportunities for new life, the spring that awaits us when Lent is finally over and Easter dawns anew.

I remember in 1984 coming to California for the first time. I thought California was the last place on earth I’d ever live; so it was quite a shock to learn I was moving here. Allison was only 8 months old and Brittany nearly three. It was a long car ride between Dallas, Texas and San Diego. When we passed Yuma, Arizona and continued on Interstate 8, we drove through that rocky, barren stretch of land made of huge boulders and not much else. It was August but the car air conditioner had to be turned off as we made our way up and down and between hills. Sometimes on the sides of the road, we’d see water labeled “not for drinking” but rather this water was for car engines that had overheated. I think this was the first time I had encountered such a wilderness place. There were few cars and little else. There was an emptiness and also a sense that this was a dangerous place. Never having traveled this way before, I suddenly realized that I was not adequately prepared. I had very little liquids. If the car broke down and we were stranded, my little girls might get very thirsty. I was afraid, and never again did we drive that stretch of wilderness without plenty of food and water.

But not all wilderness encounters are physical places. There are those spiritual deserts in which we may wander, lost and afraid. We don’t know how we got there; we’re not sure how to get out. I wonder if Jesus felt a little like this when after such a mountaintop experience of being transfigured in glory, he finds himself in a wilderness for 40 days, that biblically significant number. Jesus’ worst nightmares came true as he is sorely tempted with whether he will indeed rise to his calling as the Christ.

Our wilderness encounters, I dare say, are not this enormous; yet, they are real, and they are sometimes very difficult. No one said that the life of faith would be without any wilderness encounters. I remember a wilderness encounter much earlier in my life when I was 12 years old that proved painful and ultimately liberating. Being brought up in a fundamentalist faith, I read the Bible every day and tried to make all the pieces fit together neatly like I thought they were suppose to fit, not knowing that God can speak through story, metaphor, different voices describing the same event or same spiritual theme. I thought a factual reading was the same as a faithful reading. I remember one night sitting at my desk and reading a passage from Mark where Jesus says **all** can be forgiven except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What was that all about? In the days and weeks that followed, I found myself in spiritual and mental torment as to whether I could and did commit this blasphemy.

Was it thinking the words? Would that constitute the “unforgivable sin”? The adults around me didn’t see the problem. They were reassuring, and tried to explain away my torment. But it didn’t help. Mine was a spiritual problem and a mental problem that required me to spend

much wilderness time before my soul knew comfort. Now I know that there is a medical diagnosis for people obsessed with committing the unforgivable sin. It took me years of moving from guilt to grace, from literal understandings to understandings of the heart, from fear to faith before I felt the peace of God on the other side of this wilderness. In the church we don't talk about these things very much; I've certainly never talked about my wilderness experience in a sermon before. But it seems to me that the church is the very place we might choose to share our pain because it is here that we have community in which we need not feel shame but rather acceptance.

Times in the wilderness may vary; but all the fear, temptation, desperation that are part of wilderness encounters are similar. It may be physical illness, mental illness, poverty, loss, parenting challenges, you name it, they are all the shadow side of life, and they shape us and make us who we are. Some of the most courageous people I've ever known have faced enormous difficulties of spirit and soul day after day after day. I wonder what keeps them hanging on. I admire their steadfastness in the face of enormous obstacles, enormous pain. In our most honest moments, we say, "there but by the grace of God go I." It is good to remember our wilderness encounters so that we have compassion to bestow on others and the comfort to ease their burden when they find themselves in their desert.

Occasionally people ask me, after I've shared the early years of my spiritual journey, why I stayed with the church and gave myself to the ministry. I really don't know the answer. I think being called to be a pastor is something you do because you can't NOT do it. I do know that my wilderness times have helped me to offer solace to other people who have come my way. I remember fairly early in my ministry a young woman who was herself obsessed with whether she had committed the unforgivable sin. She would call me at all hours of the day and night and after being reassured and praying with her, she'd feel so bad that she'd woken me up. But I never cared because I had been in her wilderness with the overwhelming fear and anxiety, and it was a small thing for me to offer her the "knowing" that she was loved by a great God and that nothing she could ever do would separate her from that love. As the apostle Paul said:

**Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ.**

Perhaps my own wilderness encounters is why I find the words to the hymn the choir sang today so very meaningful. Hear some of its words once more:

**Dust and ashes touch our face, mark our failure and our falling,  
Holy Spirit, come, walk with us tomorrow, take us as disciples,  
washed and wakened by your calling, Take us by the hand and lead us, lead us  
through the desert sands, bring us living water, Holy Spirit, come.**

**Dust and ashes choke our tongue in the wasteland of depression,  
Holy Spirit, come, walk with us tomorrow through all gloom and grieving  
to the paths of resurrection.**

**Take us by the hand and and lead us, lead us through the desert sands, bring us  
living water, Holy Spirit, come. (Brian Wren, New Century Hymnal)**