

I want to begin this sermon with extending the talk about this puzzle that I began with the children. Besides the point that every piece of the puzzle is important and that it wouldn't be complete if a piece was missing, there's another point to make that's a little too complicated for the children.

If we use our imaginations, and give each puzzle piece consciousness, we can imagine that the puzzle piece here doesn't know what the puzzle piece down there is doing. And I thought this was an important lesson for church. We know what we do, but we don't always see what others do. What I know about this church is that there is a high involvement of many people -- but we all don't do the same things. What some do is very high-profile and visible, but what others do happens when no one else is around.

Some folks work many hours in the food kitchen -- not only passing out food, but cleaning the kitchen, sorting the food, and some like Rochelle pick up food from Fresh And Easy or other sources once or twice a week. We don't see her do it, but it is one of her important pieces of the puzzle that makes our church work. Sally Aiken comes in early on Monday mornings to clean up the pews and recycle the bulletins; we don't see her do this, but this is an important puzzle piece of our church. Did you wonder where those ashes for Ash Wednesday came from? We didn't see Heidi burn them in her fireplace and deliver them to church, and yet, this unseen task was another important piece of church.

Alice Scott has organized our history archives for us, yet we didn't see her do it. I could go on and on about the unknown labors of love performed by you for our church. Today as we think about our church's history following our potluck, it's important to remember that there are now and have been in our past many pieces of the puzzle that have played an important if rarely seen or recognized role in making this church be a place where God's spirit resides.

In our relationships within church, we give one another “the benefit of the doubt” because we know that together all our hearts are moving in the same direction. Every person is important and makes for a complete and whole and beautiful church.

On this, the first Sunday of Lent, we come seeking the Holy in our midst; we come seeking God. Our text tells us of Jesus' experience in the wilderness, where he spent 40 days seeking God. Seeking God through the wilderness journeys of our lives is sometimes difficult and unwelcome. If only we could buy trip insurance and cancel those wilderness journeys! These difficult journeys expose our vulnerabilities; but they also offer opportunities for new life, like the spring that awaits us when Lent is finally over and Easter dawns once again.

Some of you have heard me tell about my coming to California for the first time in 1984. 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 and very hot, but the car air conditioner had to be turned off as we made our way up and down and between boulders not knowing just how long this stretch of wilderness would last. Sometimes on the sides of the road, we'd see water labeled “not for drinking.” This water was for car engines that had overheated. I had never 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. Suddenly I realized that I was not adequately prepared for this wilderness. I had very little food or liquids in the car. If the car broke down and we were stranded, my little girls might get very thirsty. I be-

came afraid, and never again did we drive that stretch of wilderness without plenty of food and water.

But not all wilderness experiences 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 he found himself in a wilderness for 40 days. Jesus' worst nightmares came true as he is sorely tempted with whether he would rise to his calling as the Christ.

Our wilderness encounters are not this enormous; yet, they are real, and they are sometimes very difficult. Usually, the teenage years present a time of wilderness wanderings. Young people must go through a period of self-realization and discernment in order to find their places in the world. This week I was visited by two FBI agents. They were doing a security check on a young man who had applied for a public service job and who I had taught in youth group and through confirmation. This young man had had his share of journeys in the wilderness.

He is remarkably intelligent, and that doesn't always help one fit in when you're a teenager. He had learning challenges and though he was brilliant, he didn't retain knowledge and details through standard learning skills, so his grades suffered even though his intellect was way above average. His wilderness wanderings took him from first wanting a career in film, then to photograph, then to politics, and now after working as a clerk in a hotel in D.C. for several years, he has made his way to his dream job of working in the White House. He wandered a long time, but his perseverance and willingness to "keep on trucking" has meant he's finally arrived where he believes his life's work is to be.

So, for me, having had a small part in his growing over the years, it was such a joy, and so rewarding, to be able to tell these two FBI agents that the one word that best describes this young man is "integrity."

As adults we, too, may find ourselves in the wilderness from time to time -- when a job ends, when doors are shut preventing us from going the direction we want, when we face illnesses, when relationships disappoint us, when we retire, when a spouse dies...

Often these events cause us to enter a time of discernment asking questions of who we are and what will we do for the rest of our lives. When Jesus completes his time of seeking God and seeking who he is, he comes out of that place with focus, attention, and clarity. He moves into his life's mission with strength of identity and integrity. He sets an example for us to remember and reminds us that sometimes we just have to put one foot in front of the other and keep on keeping on.

For it is in these times when we are stripped of pretense, when we are most vulnerable, when we are hurting, that we are very close to the Creator's heart. Seeking God may take us to the edge; we may feel sorely tested, but we are never abandoned.

Be still, and know, I am the One who suffers.

I will be with you in the midnight of your soul.

Be still, and know, I am the joy within you.

I will be with you in the sunrise of your soul. *Jim Manley*