

## Lamenting Wilderness

Luke 4: 1-13

Psalm 91

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Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

The overarching theme for Lent will be Lament: Over the next 6 weeks of Lent we will explore various themes related to lament as we grow into people who have a deeper sense of what it means to be disciples... to follow the man Jesus.

In the early church Lent was a time of preparation... those who wanted to be baptized on Easter Sunday entered into their final 40 days of learning and testing, and it may have included fasting to symbolize the 40 days that Jesus spent being tested in the desert.

“Although this 40 day period of preparation was originally intended for those preparing for baptism, in time many church members voluntarily undertook for their own self-discipline this 40 days of penitence and fasting, reflecting on their baptismal vows and at Easter joining with the catechumens in renewing their baptismal promises.” (*Whole People of God 2007*)

Today Lent offers us the same opportunity for reflection and renewal, for lamenting the losses that we have experienced individually and as a community of faith.

Some of you are quickly calculating and saying to yourselves... hey, wait a minute, if there are six weeks of Lent that is already 42 days and Lent started on Ash Wednesday so that is a few more, what's with this number 40!

And you will be right!

The 40 days of Lent are counted without the Sundays... unlike the season of Advent before Christmas, in Lent, we do not count the Sundays.

I am not sure if it is because the early church leaders knew that six weeks of unrelenting fasting and testing would be too much for people, or whether it is part of our Hebrew heritage to keep the Sabbath holy and worship God.

Not necessarily with solemn faces and hearts, but with joyous hearts as we focus on preparing to be disciples of Christ.

But we do change our worship practices and decorations...my stole is mauve to signify a penitential period... a time of taking stock... our decorations are less, no showy flowers or glittering crosses... the Christ candle has been put away...

And the large wooden cross will be in our sanctuary all through Lent this year... a reminder that even though we live as Easter people, as people who believe in the resurrection... we also live as people of the cross...

Over time, Lent lost its initial meaning and became a time of intentional deprivation... in which some competed to see who could fast the longest, who did the most charity work, who spent the most hours in prayer and so on.

This is far, far from the intent of preparation to receive baptism.

All of those things I mentioned, fasting, prayer, and caring for those on the margins are all integral parts of our life in Christ or they can be.

But I suggest when they become another way of competing, as if God will love us more, they have lost their spiritual aspect and have simply become another way in which we can judge each other.

I propose that this Lent we use it as an intentional time of lament.

Rob Dagleish, a United Church minister wrote this, "Lamenting loss is part of our God given humanity. We would be less than human not to grieve the loss of what has been meaningful in our experience. Expressing our grief in lament is a way of revealing our true selves to God, knowing that God accepts us as we are. (*A Liberating Lament – UCPH 2010*)

Hear those words again, "Lamenting loss is part of our God given humanity."

Lamenting is scriptural, one third of the psalms are the very human laments of people who brought their anger and sorrow to God.

Let us lament the things that used to be and are no longer... lament them as a way of processing them and moving on to renewed life in Jesus Christ.

The title of my sermon this week is Lamenting Wilderness.

Who of us easily and/or voluntarily goes into the wilderness?

All of us get thrust there at some point or points in our lives... often unexpectedly... the loss of a spouse... the loss of a job... the loss of physical capacity... the loss of a relationship....

What is the first thing we do?

Run willingly toward the difficult experience? No! ☺

We usually run away from it.

This is entirely natural... it is the first stage of grieving... denial.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on grief and grieving says that there are 5 stages or aspects of grief.

- **Denial** (this isn't *happening* to me!)
- **Anger** (why is this happening to *me*?)
- **Bargaining** (I promise I'll be a better person *if*...)
- **Depression** (I don't *care* anymore)

- Acceptance (*I'm ready* for whatever comes)  
<http://www.cancersurvivors.org/Coping/end%20term/stages.htm>

While many people tend to think of these as sequential, or steps on a journey, she never intended them to be that way.

They are aspects of grief and a grieving person or community can be in be in any one of them at any time in the grieving process... and this is important to remember, just because you and we have worked through one stage, doesn't mean that it won't come back again.

Those of you who have been at funerals I have presided at have heard me touch on these aspects... and I also tell you that the feelings and emotions will continue to come and go in the coming months.

It's not a nice, neat formula that we can check off and say, "There, I have dealt with anger, check! On to the next stage!"

But, what if we went against our instincts and entered the wilderness willingly, curiously, wondering what it has to teach us?

Let's look at the readings.

The reading from Luke occurs right after Jesus' baptism... a high moment in his life... where he was full of the Holy Spirit...

And just after that high point, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days...

It's not the kind of thing that we usually envision the Holy Spirit doing is it...

We usually picture the Holy Spirit as empowering and encouraging us... not sending us out into the wilderness to wrestle with the devil...

Picture yourself in the wilderness...

How do you feel... are you cold... are you hot... do you have shelter of any sort...

Are there animals in this wilderness...

This is what Jesus experienced... Jesus was human... just like us he knew hunger and thirst and pain and sorrow...

Perhaps hunger bothered him the first few days... but after about a week he didn't notice it anymore...

He is totally focused on deepening his relationship with God...

To honouring the voice heard at his baptism... The voice that told him he was a beloved child of God...

That same voice that is said to us at our baptism... that we are beloved children of God.

Jesus was preparing to begin his public ministry...

But... before heading out into the world to preach his message of love and justice he needed to know what kind of person he was...

And in order to do that, he had to wrestle with his own temptations to do good by doing bad...

The things the devil tempted him with were not bad in themselves... turning stones into bread could feed a hungry world...

Authority over cities and nations could give him the power to effect positive change... trusting in God's protection...

But all of that would come at a price... if only he would renounce his God and worship Satan...

And Jesus, wise as he was, knew that anything gained through methods like this would be tainted and ultimately doomed...

The wilderness held great wisdom for Jesus and it can hold great wisdom for us... but only if we are willing to enter it.

I don't pretend to know what your personal wilderness experience might be and more than you can know mine.

But let's also enter it as a community of faith.

What might the wilderness hold for us?

What wisdom is there for us?

Can we befriend the wilderness?

From experience, I know that wilderness times can be times of great insight... I have learned much from my wilderness experiences... even as I fought going into them.

But one of the wondrous things about being part of a community of faith, is that we don't enter those times alone.

We have companions on the journey.

Even in our utmost solitude, we have God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit with us.

We have words of scripture, words of encouragement and challenge.

And as a community of faith, we have each other.

And so... I invite you into the wilderness... let us discover its wisdom.

Thanks be to God for it and thanks be to God for you.

Amen.