

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of light and darkness and guide to us all, the days often seem dark and foreboding. When we search for goodness, we find sin and despair. When we look for you, we seem to find absence and trouble. We go through highs and lows, not necessarily acknowledging your presence through the good times and asking where you are in the bad times. But you are always there.

God, sometimes we are called into the wilderness, and we don't want to go. We are comfortable where we are. Regular life is cushy, familiar, and we are content. Like Jesus, you may be preparing us for greater service and deeper reflection. The wilderness can be troublesome, exhausting, dreary, dark. Sometimes we are forced into the wilderness, whether we choose to go that way or not. Help us remember that you are with us. You promised us life, but you did not promise us ease. Help us not to make those two things equal, but to challenge ourselves toward living life in its fullest, no matter where we are, where we have been, or where we see life's journey taking us in the future. Help us to grasp those times of wilderness and struggle with them until we find the life in the midst of the difficulty. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, the Christ, our example and our companion throughout life's highs and lows, who gave us his guideline as we pray together...

SERMON

Some call it the valley. Some call it trial. No matter what you call it, it's symbolic of the roughest parts of our lives. In scripture, it is often known as the experience in the wilderness. The wilderness represents several things, like journey, growth, change, preparation, and toil. It's not really pleasurable; in fact, it's quite difficult. It can make no

sense when and why we are there. In fact, that's completely natural. The Israelites had experiences in the wilderness. Elijah ran into the wilderness when he was being persecuted. Jesus himself went to the wilderness before his time of ministry. All these examples show that the wilderness is an important part of scripture. Even after scripture times, people went into the wilderness experience a spiritual journey. It's never easy, but to each of these characters in retrospect, it was necessary. We can yell at God; we can consider God our companion. But, we do ourselves a big disservice if we try to avoid the wilderness parts of our lives. Often, when you think back to the hardest parts of life, it was the times when the most growth happened, but that's easier to say when you aren't in the valley. Let us see together what it means to journey through the wilderness in scripture and in our contemporary lives.

Jesus is our greatest example of journeying into the wilderness. Scripture says the Spirit led him into the wilderness. He spent 40 days in the wilderness being prepared, which in scripture lingo means "a long time." Jesus is the Son of God, but the way Luke tells the story, it sounds like he was not yet ready to take on the tasks that go with it. He was human as well as God; he had to be refined and forged into the minister he was meant to be. At the end of his long time in the wilderness, the Devil comes to tempt him when he is at his weakest. What we have here is an image of Jesus that we often don't see: the human Jesus that can be tempted. He was fully God, but Jesus was also fully human, and it's hard to see that Jesus can be just like us. At the same time, that can also be really validating. Jesus Christ, the one we always look to as our example, can be tempted too!

The temptations of Jesus are a bit misleading. The New Interpreter's Bible commentary says what we have here is a slight mistranslation of the text with the Devil

speaking, as he says “If you are the Son of God...” What it should say instead is “Since you are the Son of God...” There is no question on anyone’s part if Jesus is the Son of God; that’s been made clear several times in Luke’s Gospel. The point is not who he is. The point is what he does with his power. The testing comes after that, and the testing is subtle. It is obvious that Jesus has these powers. Each one of these tests is to show how Jesus will wield his power. Will he use it selfishly to satisfy his hunger? No. Will he use it to forcibly take over the political powers of the world? No. The third suggestion is to intentionally show it off by jumping off the temple. The Texts for Preaching commentary suggests that the Devil uses scripture to further his argument, but Jesus sees through this. It’s like the phrase from Spider Man: “With Great Power comes Great Responsibility.” Jesus is showing how he has learned what this is really all about. His power is not for blatant and extravagant use; it’s for the betterment of all people and, consequently, the service of God.

In the same way, the learning and trial of the wilderness is not about who we are in terms of titles. The point is how we best utilize ourselves, our tools, our talents for the greater betterment. The sin is not to be tempted. The sin is not to go through the wilderness. Sometimes the Spirit leads us into the wilderness, just like Jesus. No, the real sin is to leave behind what the wilderness teaches us. The wilderness is not just about testing; it’s about hearing what a period of our lives is telling us. You need to experience the journey and the toil before you experience the testing. Let’s compare it to learning a profession. You have to go through schooling before you receive any responsibility. Even after schooling, you may have to go through a time of apprenticing. You have to walk a certain path before you are given the responsibilities and tests that go with responsibility and our skill. You have the natural skill, but the time of preparation is learning how to

refine that skill into a discipline. Before God reproves the Israelites and before the testing of Jesus, there was days, years in the wilderness to understand the teachings. Jesus received his calling fully when John baptized him in the river, and then he went to discern the calling before taking it on fully. We don't know exactly what Jesus' pre-testing teachings were, but they prepared him for the final testing of the devil. We need the wilderness for what it teaches us, as difficult and dark as they may be. We need the low times to prepare us for the highs of the mountaintops.

Make no mistake, I'm not romanticizing the wilderness. The wilderness is not happy; it can be a horrible place. It can make you question everything, which is unnerving, to say the least. Suffering of any kind is not to be lauded as spectacular or wonderful, but it is natural as a part of living. The wilderness can be a time when we are angry at God. That's OK. We can react many different ways. I don't think that God is responsible for our suffering. It can feel like God has abandoned us. The scripture speaks of God's seeming abandonment. Jesus quotes Psalm 22 on the cross, saying "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It's OK to feel that way. Even when we believe God is absent, God is with us when the suffering comes to companion, to guide, to help us learn what life is presenting us. The lessons never are easy, but they shape us. We become stronger, we become wiser, we learn to live more and more as Christ teaches us to be.

What is your wilderness experience? We have all had them. It was probably a time when you had to go to into the darkness when you probably didn't want to. An example of the wilderness can be the "rags to riches" stories often lauded in culture. One person whose wilderness story has become famous is that of Kurt Warner. He was one of my favorite football players when I was just coming into high school. If you don't remember,

he was the quarterback who led the St. Louis Rams from four-win season in 1998 to 13 wins in 1999 with a Super Bowl victory. Kurt came out of nowhere. Before he went from the Arena Leagues to a backup in St. Louis, this washed-up quarterback was stocking shelves in an Iowa Hy-Vee Grocery store. He could barely get by for his family. What kept him afloat in the darkest times was his faith. Kurt Warner became not only a great quarterback but a great spokesman for how faith keeps you afloat during the toughest times. We do not know if he lost his faith while in his wilderness; we just know that his wilderness taught him something. Many wilderness journeys are much more difficult than being downgraded to a less spectacular job. He journeyed through it all and found that God was there with him all the time. It is not a lesson that God will bring us to super stardom if we trust in God. We do not even say that the wilderness is going to leave us happy on the other side. We instead trust that God will shape us and form us into godly creatures with the experiences of the wilderness, we can come through the testing with renewed awareness and goodness.

I felt a time of discernment one might call the wilderness when I was in my third year at Iliff, and I felt like I was not ready to leave. Many of my peers, like me, were planning on graduation, but somehow I felt like I had unfinished business there. Only in retrospect do I understand what that was all about now. I was meant to come back to Iliff for one more year, to get one more degree, to learn more about what it means to be a pastor. I was there to strengthen my relationships with friends and mentors. I was meant to meet my fiancée. When I was sitting in my room in February of 2011, talking to my parents about this new inclination I got about coming back to school, they were blindsided. This was totally not a part of the plan. It meant doing something that was far outside of all

of our experiences. It meant learning, but it did not give the same amount of personal pain that others experience.

This weekend in particular we observe the time in the wilderness that was of deep pain for many. We journeyed as a country into the wilderness to grasp what it meant to have “liberty and justice for all” in the 1960s and forward. This weekend we as a nation recognize the work of Martin Luther King Jr., a prophet who carried the voice of the Spirit in the darkness. We had difficult lessons to learn then in how we treat each person as a human being. We had to learn how to utilize our power as a nation for God’s ends. Those lessons were hard to learn, and we consistently need to be reminded of the difficult path that wilderness was and to avoid injustices like that again.

Like the Civil Rights movement, some have incredible losses that we cannot begin to prescribe, whether individually or communally. The wilderness could be a loss; it could be a time of grief. Often death sends us into the wilderness. You could be questioning something you thought was rock-solid. Faith can be one of those things. Suffering does not necessarily make sense or work on a schedule. The wilderness can be a space of days, months, or even years. How long did yours last? You may still be in it. All of these things are OK; none of these are weaknesses. We go through life in ways that we may not understand or find flattering, but life comes to teach us lessons we often can only understand in retrospect if even then.

The wilderness isn’t a fun place to be. We hide from it. We shirk it. We just don’t want to be there. But we will be there. As human beings, we are destined to go through the peaks and the valleys. The question then becomes, what do we do with it? How will we live in the wilderness? It can take days or years, and that’s not easy. Our inclination is to

escape as quickly as possible, but when we do, we will find that we needed to stay. The wilderness teaches us lessons that we will be tested on later. The testing of this is not comfortable, but it makes us more whole. Often, we will look back and see how it happened and how we grew throughout it. That can take months or even years, hardly ever all at once. Jesus has been there, so Jesus knows what it means to journey through the darkness. God does not directly intervene; God didn't with Jesus' experience in the wilderness. But, as always, when the darkness is deepest, when we feel like we are walking all alone, we aren't. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.