

Sermon for 1Lent – Year A
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
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Going into the Wilderness Holding Fast to Jesus

Confession “they” say is good for the soul. First of all, who is “they” anyway? Let’s be honest, confession is never easy and grace is never cheap. Neither is true forgiveness which then demands an honest effort at repentance and amendment of one’s life. Confession for the sake of confessing out loud is insufficient... yet true confession, the stark truth standing out of the shadows and brought into the light, now, that’s what I believe is truly good for the soul.

So, back to a confession. Becoming an Episcopalian is one of the greatest gifts of my life and the most costly decision of my life. Grace-filled and costly in so of ways. Most of you know that I grew up in a devout Roman Catholic family. “Conversion” as they called it back then, that is, crossing over from one denomination to another was always held out as a possibility for “those Protestants or others who would find their way, thank you, Jesus, to the one true holy and apostolic church, which was then, only to be found in the Roman Catholic tradition”. And growing up in an Irish Catholic family in the northeast and going to Roman Catholic schools deeply steeped me in the conviction that one could never, ever leave... Why how could you leave the “one true, holy catholic and apostolic church?” What would ever be the point of that... since you would freely forsake your very salvation?

Well, I had more questions than answers. Questions that haunted my heart and my spirit. And I couldn’t, try as I may, settle with the answers I was being offered. So, I gave myself license to question, and question everything I did. Only it didn’t quite go the way I had planned. Since I passionately loved the church, since I prayed with St. Catherine of Sienna and St. Teresa of Avila, I wanted to love Jesus more than anything else in this world. But when it became so hard, when it became impossible for me to surrender my will, my intellect, my spirit, my life as a girl and then a woman, when, God help me, when my marriage failed, when the institutional church was assigned a priest with a long history of clergy abuse,, and then God help me even more, when I began to honor my deepest, God-given identity as a woman who would love another woman, all “*you know what*” seemed to literally break loose. Nothing I did, no therapy was sufficient, no spiritual direction provided all the answer, let alone the few I really needed to understand. I knew I had to leave Rome. I was dying. My faith was dying. But where to go?

So, I did the only thing I thought I could do. I would back to school and study. I began Divinity school the week after my father’s funeral. As I was grieving the death of my father, I also hoped to heal from the heartbreak of a loss of trust in the institutional church and to put the tiny, fractured pieces of my once pretty well-heeled and honed life on a shelf *I found myself in the wilderness.- a place I had never been before at least not consciously.* You see, I never even camped as a child, I never really opted to do anything that wouldn’t result in a resoundingly successful accomplishment, and I had never ever contemplated leaving home, literally or metaphorically.

I remember reading, weeping, sobbing really, as I would re-read the gospel account we have before us this day. Jesus, driven out into the wilderness to face into the temptations somehow related to mine. We are told that Jesus is out in the wilderness, forty days and forty nights, meaning a very long, long time. And how he encountered in the wilderness, the temptations that related to his deepest hunger, his deepest identity, his deepest desire for power, for power less than God's purposes.

What about you? At what times in your life have you found yourself in the wilderness – with little or no security, protection, direction? This is a wilderness where not only do we find temptations but wild beasts that threaten our very lives.

If you are anything like me, then the sojourns through the wilderness don't just happen one time. They can come at any time for any reason. End of a marriage or relationship, loss of a meaningful job, a diagnosis, yours or someone close to you, a depression or addiction that just doesn't seem to let you go free... on and on... and we find ourselves driven like Jesus to that barren place seemingly with no capacity to defend ourselves from the desolation of life all around us.

It is true for me. I lost my once take-it-for-granted place in my family of origin following my reception into the Episcopal Church and those relationships would never be the same. Except to admit this day, that they were really not what I thought them to be in the first place. Love was somehow conditional, at least that is what it so often felt like to me. The freedom to fail, the freedom to be angry, the freedom to ask hard hard questions about what mattered about obedience and expectations, the freedom to be me... really me... And as I look back on my life, it was in the wilderness unlike any other place that I have ever been, however beautiful it looked, however accomplished it seemed, however "good" I tried to be, those beautiful places, I had constructed early on in my life as "safe" were truly the most dangerous places, the most soul-destroying places I could ever have lived. ***You see, going into the wilderness with Jesus saved my life, not just once but more times since then than I can tell you.***

This public confession is still an emotional one for me. Sure, I would love to paint the picture of a perfect family, in which I was everything my loving parents wanted me to be and then some. And there are days the "old tapes" still play. Sure, it would have seemed better to my parents, less foolish, at the very least, to go to law school instead of the divinity school. "What in God's name are you thinking, Judith?" they would ask and in all truth, I was asking that very same question.

The truth for me was and remains, "thinking" - that is, staying in my head only- always gets me in real, honest to goodness trouble. As I am an over-thinker, an over-achiever, if I don't check myself and pray my way from my head to my heart, problems arise. And unless I stopped, unless I came to a dead-stop, I might have lived a very different kind of life that was never authentically mine to live.

What about you? Have you tried on other lives in denial of your own authentic life? Have you submitted to a conditional love that demanded something of you that you just could not give? Have you ever felt guilty, ashamed, and abandoned because you chose the freedom and healing that God alone can offer you as others around asked their questions and formed their judgments about you?

My brothers and sisters in Christ, each and everyone of us has our time in the wildernesses of life. In those wilderness experiences, like Jesus, we name hungers we never realized we had, power and privilege we never imagined we owned or that owned us, divinely given freedom we were always so terrified to embrace.

Like Jesus, we are not left in the wilderness unprotected from the temptations we face or the choices that would bring life or death. Like Jesus, we find the angels, the messengers of God's grace right there in the very midst of the wilderness that brings us new life, new freedom, new trust in ***the Divine who is found in all those places that terrify us the most.***

These forty days and forty nights of Lent can be a trek in the wilderness if we consent. ***What if, just what if we hold fast to Jesus and meet him there?***

Sure, we probably will encounter demons of our own making, temptations of our own construction, shadowy truths needing the light of day... ***And we will find Jesus there...*** first, last and always.

Jesus knows this wilderness trek for himself. He has been there and done that and he will be our very strength and salvation if we make the journey assured of his redeeming love.

Trust the wilderness trek. And you will find your deepest hunger for God, and you will be fed with the bread of life.

Trust in the presence of God. And you will find your unquenchable thirst met in the cup of salvation.

Trust in the presence of Jesus. And you will find none other than your deepest, most authentic self, having endured the stripping away of your own unnecessary and destructive patterns of being.

Trust in the ministry of the angels. And you will be found by the angels who will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against the stone.

In the wilderness there is life... Divinely given. Divinely offered. Divinely intended for you.

Amen.