

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

What the Wilderness Can Teach Us

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On the first Sunday in Lent, the text is always the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Whether we are reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, Lent begins in the wilderness. The passage follows Jesus' baptism. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Forty is a familiar number in the Scriptures. In Genesis 7, Noah spent 40 days on the Ark waiting to see dry land. In Numbers 14, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years in the wilderness. Pregnant women gestate for 40 weeks, so no matter how you cut it, 40 basically means "a really long time." Let's take a look at the Scriptures.

The Temptation of Jesus-- **Matthew 4: 1-11**

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

4 But Jesus answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" **7** Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; **9** and the devil said to Jesus,

"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." **10** Jesus said to him,

"Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" **11** Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Minister: Holy Wisdom, holy Word.

People: Thanks be to God.

Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill was attributed with saying eight famous words: "If you are going through hell, keep going." In other words, don't quit if you are in the wilderness. Keep going.

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, today you present us with a challenging text. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. O, we know wilderness places. 40 years of wandering, lost and alone. Today, open our eyes and ears to hear what the wilderness can teach us. To

that end, pour through me the gift of preaching that by some miracle of your grace these ordinary words might become your life-giving word for us today. May it be tailor made for us, and speak to us in our place of greatest need. And we know that it will for we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

As I prayed about this text and struggled about where we are as a congregation, more than 40 days in the wilderness but less than 40 years thank you Jesus, I kept thinking, what does this text have to teach us? Some important lessons emerged.

Theological Principle #1—Anxiety—How do you deal with anxiety?

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner quoted Philippians 4:6 this week in a daily devotion saying, “have no anxiety about anything.” Buechner says, “isn’t this like telling a woman with a bad head cold not to sniffle and sneeze or ... asking a wino to lay off the booze or asking a compulsive gambler to stay away from the track?” Buechner says: “Since the worst things that happen are apt to be the things you don’t see coming, do you really think if you only can see them coming, you will be able to prevent them from happening?” – Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

St. Paul wrote, “Have no anxiety about anything, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Let’s be crystal clear. St. Paul does not say that if you pray about things the worst things will not happen. He simply says, let your requests be made known to God, “lay these things at God’s feet.” When life worries you, when big decisions are coming your way, when the future is

uncertain, when a loved one is going through a health crisis, when you are going through a health crisis, when there is trouble at work, when our children are struggling, when things are bad or serious or dire, when there is nothing you can do, there is really only one thing to do—PRAY. Buechner says, “Come hell or high water, PRAY,” and ask God to be with you, come what may. Soren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish theologian, put it this way. First we pray for what we want. If we don’t get what we want, then we pray for understanding. When understanding doesn’t come, we pray for God’s presence, and God carries us through the wilderness places.

I have read a number of articles and books in the past few years about the rise anxiety in teenagers. There is no doubt that mental health issues are on the rise in our children. Doctors are hesitant to give teenagers an official diagnosis of depression because their brains are still developing. But consider a few likely causes. A recent US News and World Report article said our kids are “hyper-connected and overstimulated” with 95 percent of American teenagers having access to a smartphone and 45% saying they are online “almost constantly.” Here is the trouble. They are connected, but not connected at all. They have 1500 friends, but know virtually nothing of substance about most of them.

To make things worse, they are growing up in a time in history that is uncertain. Our teenagers grew up as post-9/11 kids. They have never known a world that was not shadowed by terrorism, mass shootings, and health pandemics. Anxiety is the backdrop of their lives. Anxiety is their screensaver, it's always there by no fault of their own.

Finally, teenagers connect to their friends differently than you and I do. Have you ever seen teenagers socialize? They sit on their phones side by side and text each other. That is why we take their phones away when they come to church and confirmation. And they hate us for it. But then they love us. This forces them into community.

Conversations. Connectedness. (*US NEWS and World Reports, What's Driving the Rise in Teen Depression? By Reychele Cassada Lohman, April 22 2019.*)

This Lent I am trying to spend more time with people face to face. More time in nature. And more time in prayer and meditation. All three are antidotes for anxiety. And come hell or high water, I have committed to PRAY. CS Lewis once said, "I pray not because I think it will change God, I pray because it changes me." I challenge you to join me come hell or high water in prayer this Lent, 40 days in the wilderness.

Theological Principle #2—For Many People, a Wilderness Experience follows the Death of a Loved One

While many people experience wilderness places at one time or another, the most

common time people experience the wilderness is after the death of a loved one. When a person who was a part of our daily life, our spouse, our child, our parent, a sister or brother, whomever it is, when they are no longer there, life becomes hard in a way you never knew it could be. After my parents died when I went through my parents' personal belongings and took their clothes to Goodwill, it was one of the most heart wrenching experiences of my life. Even now, close to 30 years later when I run across something that belonged to one of them—a watch, a wedding band, a photo I forgot I had, a handwritten letter—my throat catches, tears fill my eyes, and I handle the item like a holy relic. Do you know there were days when I thought it would kill me, the grief of it, but it did not? Eventually sharp pain became numbness. I'm not sure what is worse.

Gerald Sittster lost his wife, his mother, and his daughter in a head on collision. He describes grief in a book called *A Grace Disguised*:

Loss creates a barren present, as if one is sailing on a vast sea of nothingness. Those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long and a future for which they hope. They want to return to the harbor of the familiar and recover what was lost... Or they want to sail on and discover a meaningful future that promises to bring them life again. Instead they find

themselves living in an in between place; (a wilderness place).

We never fully understand the importance of Easter until we have lost a loved one. Suddenly heaven is not some vague concept, but everything is riding on it. Do you know my entire call to the ministry came out of losing my folks when I was so young? Out of those dark days came the foundation for who I am. These things I believe with every fiber of my being. I believe that when we die we go to live with God. I believe one day we will be together again. And on the day that we die we pass over into a new life where everything will be the way God created it to be. And God's great story will get better and better and have no end.

Theological Principle #3—How do you make it out of the wilderness?

For me the way out of the wilderness many times was aided by friends and loved ones and support and family. A good therapist. For some medication helps. Asking for help is definitely the hardest part of healing. Our kind of people do not like to admit when we need help. We think it is a sign of weakness. Hear me clearly. It is not.

We all know friends and loved ones who struggle to find their way out of the darkness, out of times of despair. Why do some folks traverse the wilderness

quickly? And other folks get stuck? I don't pretend to know all the answers. But I do know that depression is like a vat of molasses and grief is not linear. We go through stages of anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. And then we go through them again. Certain things trigger our emotions. Times of the year (birthdays, holidays). Foods, traditions. The empty chair confronts us every day.

People who have a strong system of support do better than those who are alone. And it is not just friends we need when we are in trouble. Doctors, therapists, ministers, too. It may sound like it's not much, but we have four minister on staff. This is what we are here for. Listening, talking, praying with you. It is the most profound part of my ministry, walking alongside you when things are tough. When you have to find plan b. When you don't know where to turn. We are here so you are are not alone. Come hell or high water, we will get through it together.

This is my prayer for Lent:

May your anxiety give way to peace.

May you lay your worries at God's feet.

May you have love and compassion in your heart.

And may Christ the Light of the World be behind you, above you, in front of you and within you.

May it be so. May it be so.

ⁱSittster, Gerald. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, p. 56.