

If you've ever had wilderness experience, you know it can be a matter of life and death. I'm no Sherm Bull who summited all the highest continental peaks, including Mount Everest, but I'll never forget climbing Colorado's *Long's Peak* with my cousin's husband, John Nevins. John had more technical training in mountain climbing and avalanche first aid than I, so he was lead climber in our two-man expedition. There are easier endurance climbs to the summit, but we took a more technical southern route, and were about 40 feet from the top when he turned around to say to me, *we have to get off the mountain now*. We were on a steep slope of snow, about 500 feet before it dropped off another cliff. The snow we were on was getting soft and could go anytime. It was disappointing, but even I knew it wasn't worth staying another minute.

*Into the Wild*, the book by Jon Krakauer, chronicles the life and death of 24-year-old Chris McCandless who braved the Alaskan wilderness for approximately 113 days. Kim and I have enjoyed watching the TV series *Alone* about those who compete to see how long they can survive extreme conditions. You battle the elements, where to find food, and how to survive a wild animal attack. The suspense is about whether the contestants will live or die...

Today's gospel text is a kind of first century reality show, with Jesus starring in a 40-day wilderness experience. It's different, in that this is God's beloved son, and apparently, Mark writes, driven immediately after his baptism into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. And it was not just Jesus against the elements, food source and the wild animals. It was Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by Satan.

Three of the synoptic gospels capture this story, but Mark's is the most efficient rendering with only two sentences... Luke and Matthew expand the story considerably, describing the dialogue Jesus has with the Enemy and three basic temptations of materialism, power and security. But they leave out the detail Mark includes, that Jesus was with the *wild animals*. I think that is to assure us that Jesus was in the back country, not just a camping trip in the back yard. Wild animals that were known to exist in first century Palestine are lion, bear, leopard, crocodile and wild boar. This was not an Edward Hicks *Peaceable Kingdom* or Henri Rousseau jungle painting. It was not a children's story about *Where the Wild Things Are*... Mark wants us to know that Jesus was in a dangerous place, physically and spiritually.

The word for wilderness here in the Greek is interesting, ἔρημον, which is the root for the English word "hermit." Hermits traditionally go out to live in the wilderness alone. We have our own New England hermit in Henry David Thoreau. My favorite, more recluse

than hermit, is Robert Frost. He ends his poem *To Earthward*, with the closing lines, “I craved strong sweets, but those Seemed strong when I was young; The petal of the rose It was that stung. / Now no joy but lacks salt, That is not dashed with pain And weariness and Fault; I crave the stain / Of tears, the aftermark Of almost too much love, The sweet of bitter bark And burning clove. / When stiff and sore and scarred I take away my hand From leaning on it hard In grass and sand, The hurt is not enough: I long for weight and strength To feel the earth as rough To all my length.”

Frost describes what many writers, poets, artists, musicians, philosophers, theologians, and well, just about everyone is trying to wrestle with... There is in all of us a void, an emptiness, a desire, a craving, a hunger, a thirst, a restlessness, a dissatisfaction, frustration, aching, an unquenchable fire or fundamental disease. Augustine said, “our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” Thoreau called it “quiet desperation.” Blaise Pascal called it “craving, helplessness...this infinite abyss.” The great German writer Goethe called it, “The Holy Longing.”

This season of Lent, these 40 days patterned after the rather shocking leading of Jesus by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted, is a time when we remember how Jesus himself wrestled with these ambiguities and paradoxes, the deepest longings of life. And so, we remember and some of us even take this time to enter more purposefully into our own wilderness experience of fasting, emptying, withholding and withdrawal, in order to acknowledge and even focus on the unfulfilled longings of our own lives.

Lent is a season to test again some of the assumptions of life that we’ve lived with too long and which seem to require more and more of us and give less and less. It’s a season to reflect more profoundly on the yet needed mending of our personal and collective brokenness, the redemption of our resignation, the lonely pilgrimage to which we are called through this spiritual wilderness and various seasons of temptations, toward the promise and hope of peace.

As Christians, we are responsible for the care of our souls, but also for the care of our culture. The temptations Jesus faced of materialism, power and security are temptations we must face as well. How will we use our relationship as beloved children, heirs of the King of the Universe, to serve our larger society, to seek just and lasting peace for all? It’s interesting that Mark’s staccato account of Christ’s wilderness wanderings lead him back to the world, calling his followers to repentance and belief, healing the sick, and using his holy power to bring wholeness for others.

How then shall we live? ... We must first confront our inner demons and the demons of our society. Why have we resigned ourselves to a level of gun violence that is extreme among all other civilized nations, the latest tragic example being on Monday during what was supposed to be Kansas City’s celebration of another Super Bowl win? How 22 people

can end up getting shot at a parade and for us to just yawn and turn the page of the newspaper, or click to another newsfeed, without giving it another thought, I don't understand. Or how we as a people think it's OK that President Putin murders his main opposition leader Alexis Navalny, continue to wage war on a free country, and we, the so-called leader of the Free World simply gives up supporting those fighting for freedom and basic civil rights... How can we continue to hear about Climate Change and don't change our lifestyle? How is it that one in four women experience physical violence and one in seven men from a partner? How can we not make room in our town for affordable housing?

Our "spirituality" is about what we do with our unrest and how we try and "fill" the wilderness longing of our lives. We can repent... We can turn our pain in the wilderness to violence and darkness, or we can turn our pain in the wilderness to beauty, peace, and new life.

Recently, *New Canaan Chamber Music* offered a concert here with Jan Volger, the German cellist. Last night he performed at Carnegie Hall with Amanda Gorman. She read her poem, "New Day's Lyric" while Jan played Bach's Prélude to Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major.... Bach lost ten of his twenty children. He lost his first wife. Amanda and Jan wanted to blend Bach's pathos with our politics and the need for hope... And so I close with the reading of her poem *New Day's Lyric*... May it inspire us as we follow Jesus into the wilderness of these Lenten 40 days, and pursue our holy longing on the way to a new day, and new life in Christ...

May this be the day  
We come together.  
Mourning, we come to mend,  
Withered, we come to weather,  
Torn, we come to tend,  
Battered, we come to better.  
Tethered by this year of yearning,  
We are learning  
That though we weren't ready for this,  
We have been readied by it.  
We steadily vow that no matter  
How we are weighed down,  
We must always pave a way forward.

\*

This hope is our door, our portal.  
Even if we never get back to normal,  
Someday we can venture beyond it,

To leave the known and take the first steps.  
So let us not return to what was normal,  
But reach toward what is next.

\*

What was cursed, we will cure.  
What was plagued, we will prove pure.  
Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree,  
Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee,  
Where we weren't aware, we're now awake;  
Those moments we missed  
Are now these moments we make,  
The moments we meet,  
And our hearts, once all together beaten,  
Now all together beat.

\*

Come, look up with kindness yet,  
For even solace can be sourced from sorrow.  
We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday,  
But to take on tomorrow.

\*

We heed this old spirit,  
In a new day's lyric,  
In our hearts, we hear it:  
For auld lang syne, my dear,  
For auld lang syne.  
Be bold, sang Time this year,  
Be bold, sang Time,  
For when you honor yesterday,  
Tomorrow ye will find.  
Know what we've fought  
Need not be forgot nor for none.  
It defines us, binds us as one,  
Come over, join this day just begun.  
For wherever we come together,  
We will forever overcome.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*