

**Lent I (RCL/B)**  
**March 1, 2009**

**St. Margaret's**  
**Annapolis**

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

**WILDERNESS.** It is a word heard whenever we hear the story of the people of God. It is more than a desert; more than a wasted and desolate place. It is an experience.

- Abraham and Sarah left the comfort of home for a Promised Land... only to spend the better part of a lifetime in the WILDERNESS... learning about the God who had led them there.
- Moses, after discovering the truth about his Hebrew origins, killed an Egyptian guard who was beating a Hebrew slave... and then escaped into the WILDERNESS. But instead of dying out there alone, it was there that he learned his true identity. Later, Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery, but instead of going right into the fabled Promised Land, they wandered in the WILDERNESS for 40 years, being shaped into the Chosen People of God.
- And Mark's Jesus, having just been baptized by John in the Jordan as a symbol of the inauguration of his ministry, is then driven into the WILDERNESS, where he actually gains strength for his mission.

Every adult – and many children and teenagers – knows something about WILDERNESS; about what it is like to be in a desolate and wasted place.

There are at least two ways that we come to find ourselves in the WILDERNESS. One is the result of the circumstances of our lives: sorrow, grief, deep disappointment, illness, betrayal, hurt, struggles of all sorts.

The other is this: *it seems that whenever we give our lives to God... whenever we try to become more fully and authentically the person God created us to be... we find ourselves driven into the WILDERNESS.*

Whether it is a matter of one or the other – going along in one's life, doing what we think we're supposed to be doing, when one of those life-changing circumstances knocks us for a loop and we find we are laid low in the middle of the desert...

...or having just listened and responded to what we believed to be the voice of God, we find that we are lost in the middle of the WILDERNESS... whether it is a matter of one or the other, it is a bitter thing to find ourselves wondering around in this desolate and wasted place.

But take heart! There is a reason for this theme in the story of the people of God. There is a reason for being driven into the WILDERNESS. There is, at least, redemption in the experience, because three things happen to us there.

- The first is that we are tempted by Satan. The voice of the tempter might tell us many things. It might whisper, "You were seeking the wrong thing," or "This is your home and you will always be here."

Several years ago, Bill Moyers interviewed Joseph Campbell, the famed teacher and author on the subject of mythology. Campbell coined the phrase “follow your bliss” to describe how one is to be true to one’s self and seek the highest good – Christians might say, to seek God.

But what happens when we turn toward our bliss, Campbell says, is the voice of the Tempter says things to us like:

“You don’t deserve bliss.”

“Who do you think you are?”

“I’m the one you were looking for.”

“This is the best you can hope for.”

- The second thing that happens in the WILDERNESS is that we are tended by angels. All the while we are searching in the WILDERNESS for God who led us there – all the while it feels as if God has abandoned us there – we are being cared for by the most unlikely agents of God.

Frederick Beuchner tells a story of being so despondent one day, that while driving along a country road, he pulled over so he could just sit and think. As he sat there, the one and only car that drove by had on it a license plate that read “TRUST.”

But so often we don’t recognize the angels tending us. It’s like the old joke about the man whose house was in the path of a terrible flood. As the waters rose, the man sat on his porch and watched. A neighbor came by in a Jeep and offered to take him to higher ground, but he man said, “No, God will take care of me.”

As the waters got higher, the man went upstairs in his house and waited by a second story window. Some people came by in a boat and offered to take him to safety. “No thank you,” said the man. “God will save me.”

Finally, the man is forced onto the roof of his house. As the waters threaten to sweep him away, a helicopter appeared and hovered overhead. From the loudspeaker a voice said, “We’ve come to rescue you.” “No,” shouted the man. “God will rescue me.”

Well, the man drowned. When he was checking in at the pearly gates, St. Peter welcomed him, gave him directions to his cloud, and asked if he had any questions. The man was about to say no, but then said, “Just one thing. Why didn’t God save me?”

Peter answered, “We sent a Jeep, a boat, and a helicopter! What more did you want?”

Even when we are in the WILDERNESS, whether we recognize them or not, we are being tended by angels.

- The third thing that happens in the WILDERNESS is that we are formed and shaped as the people of God. It is when we have given our lives to God and gone into that desolate and wasted place that we come to know God and “abba” (daddy) and “imma” (mama) – not only the Holy One, but abba, imma, the Near One.

The rector of a prominent city church told this true story:

*A worn and ragged man came into the church one day at noon, walked down the long center aisle, stood there a moment, then turned and left. The church staff began to realize that the man*

*did this day after day. Becoming concerned, one of them asked him if there was anything they could do for him.*

*“No,” he said, “I just come to the altar and say, ‘Jesus, this is Jim.’ It’s the best I can do.”*

*Months went by this way. Then one day the rector got a call from the sisters of a charity hospital where Jim had been admitted. When the rector went to visit Jim, the nurse who took him to the ward told him that Jim had transformed the most difficult ward in the hospital. Everyone, she said, had tried to bring some measure of joy or peace to this ward, but they had all failed. But Jim, she said, had made it a new place.*

*She went on to tell the rector that she had asked Jim how he had accomplished this remarkable thing. “Oh, it’s my visitor,” Jim had told her. “What visitor?” she had asked, knowing that there had been no one who had come to see him. “Oh, yes,” Jim said. “Every day at noon he comes and stands at the foot of my bed and says, “Jim, it’s Jesus.”*

If you are in the WILDERNESS now, do not despair. If a voice is telling you that it is your home, or that it will never end, that voice is the Tempter. Do not believe it. And if you are in a desolate and wasted place, look around. The most unlikely creatures will be angels to you, agents of God. And if you are in the desert, remember from all the stories of the people of God that you are being shaped and formed as a child of God. Even though you may not know it, God is very near.

And if you have been there and come out again, be there when your sisters and brothers find themselves in the WILDERNESS and tell them: this is a holy place. Take heart!

Amen.

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