

Wandering in Wilderness Places

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

In our reading this morning from Mark's Gospel we read that "*Jesus was baptized*" (which would have been a time of celebration and joy)... but then it says, "*And the Spirit **immediately** drove him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him*" ...

Isn't this a reflection of how life can be?... One moment we're celebrating and happy and rejoicing— and the next moment we find ourselves in a very unfamiliar and frightening place... in what some refer to as, 'wilderness places' ...

In fact, isn't that how it is with those planning on enjoying retirement (but who find themselves getting sick instead (and all of that planning falls apart in the blink of an eye)... or with those who get excited after buying a home (only to lose a job not long after)... or even how it was just one year ago (when life seemed so normal – and then, before we knew it we were introduced to words like 'lockdown' – 'social distancing' – and 'quarantine')...

And my point is that one moment life can seem so promising – and yet, (like it was for our Lord) the next moment we can find ourselves in wilderness places – where finding comfort (or even a resemblance of what once seemed normal and hopeful) seemingly impossible to find...

A few weeks ago I presided at a funeral – and on the day of the service I met with a woman whose husband had died very suddenly and unexpectedly... and after she shared with me her many pictures and introduced me to her friends – I pulled her aside and said, "*How are you doing?*" ...

And she said, "*I feel find right now – but I am not looking forward to next week*" ...

And so I said, "*What is going to happen next week?*" ...

And she said, "*I'm going to be alone... my husband's gone and my family will go home... and I dread it*" ...

And I think what she was trying to say to me is that next week will be unfamiliar territory (where the rules she once knew have changed, the days seem longer, the nights much colder, and the sense of being all alone impossible to ignore)... because sometimes life can lead us to places we'd rather not travel... but like it or not, it happens to all of us at some point or another (in so many different ways)...

As I was preparing for this morning I was also thinking about my own visit to Israel 5 years ago... and on one of the excursions that we made (we visited the wilderness place that Jesus was brought to)... and just south and east of the Jordan River (near the Dead Sea) is a dusty, dry desert that just so happens to be the lowest elevation on earth...in fact, it is 1,360 feet below sea level... the reference in Psalm 23 which says, "*Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death*" is a reference to this desert place because - in the many crevices and caves that sit down in the valley - they're so dark and without light that it attracts wild beasts who sit and wait (for prey to walk by)...

Needless to say it is a scary place to be, a lonely place to be, a frightening place to be (and very difficult to journey through - especially if you find yourself in that wilderness place alone - or at night)...

And unlike our Lord - we had plenty of water, an air-conditioned bus to run back to, and a guide who knew his way around the desert ... and I will always remember him say to us, "*When you walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death - make sure you arrive in this place with the things **you trust** will get you out*"...

And he preceded to tell us to bring a compass, a weapon, plenty of water, and if possible - a cell phone...

But what are we supposed to bring with us when the 'Valley of the Shadow of Death' is the life that we're living now?... how do we get out alive when it seems like our world is falling apart?... what do we when we find ourselves all alone, frightened, lost, or dealing with some obstacle (that seems impossible to overcome?)...

Well, maybe the answer is also found in where we put our faith... ~~what is it that we really trust and believe in?...~~

and it's certainly the wilderness where you will discover what you really believe (and what you trust) in

Which reminds me of my early days in ministry (when I was a chaplain on Long Island – in my 1st year of seminary) and I had met a man who was in the hospital with a terminal illness (what it was I don't remember)... but I do remember asking him 'where his faith was'... and I remember he said, "I don't have faith in anything – especially not God"...

but he was
certainly in his
own wilderness place 3

And it didn't occur to me at the time – but years later it dawned on me how wrong that man was... of course he had faith... in fact, every single person has faith in something... I would even go so far as to say that it's impossible not to have faith – because if we didn't have faith (we'd never leave the house)...

I mean, think about it for a moment – we put faith in many things (and in many people)... in fact, every time you fly on an airplane you put your faith in the pilot and in the plane... when you have surgery you put your trust in the surgeon... you need faith to invest with a bank, or drive on the highway, or eat at a restaurant...

But remember, faith is only as good as its object... so if we trust people, we get what people can do; if we trust money, we get what money can do... If we trust ourselves, we get what only we can do... But if we trust God, we get what God can do...

But the question is: what can God do?... what can God do when we find ourselves in pain, or scared and alone, or struggling to find hope in the face of adversity?... What can God do to help us find our way out of wilderness places?...

Well, I can only share my own experience and tell you that there have been many times in my life where I found myself in the Valley of the Shadow of Death... and each time I was there - my immediate response was to panic, to cry, to be angry, perhaps even turn away from God...

and yet, I can only stand in this pulpit today because thankfully I know (without a doubt) that God never turned away from me... and how do I know that?...

it was through faith that I
have drawn strength, courage, & hope
(even in the wilderness)

Well, I can only give my own witness and tell you (although not easy) it has been my faith that has time and time again brought me back from the gates of hell - and into the hands of our Savior (where throughout my life I have been blessed to

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know of God's Grace and His goodness with the peace I have within)... and there is no doubt in my mind that if God can carry me through the difficulties of this world – He can surely carry me into the world to come...

You know, I've heard it said that the word BIBLE is an acronym meaning (Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth) but do you know what I believe God's Word is?... I believe God's Word is His promise – a promise that He will never leave us (and I stand before you as a witness)...

Yes, sometimes we find ourselves in wilderness places – but it's then (more than any other time) that we need to hold onto His promises... and as it says in Scripture, "His promises never fail"... because not only has Jesus been in the wilderness place himself (he knows the way out)... and he will lead you (if you call upon his name) and put your faith in him...

May you be strong when you leave the Lord's House this morning (knowing that God will carry you when you are weak)

May you be blessed to know that He walks beside you (even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death)

And may you be bold to keep the faith – and know that you are His – now and forever!!!

In Jesus' name we pray!

Amen!

