

“WILDERNESS WONDERINGS”

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 3:13-4:1

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church



When I think of wilderness, I think about old growth forests and uninhabited mountain regions, places where your pop-up camper can't go, places you have to walk to. Wilderness is a wild place only lightly touched by human presence. Wilderness is the Grand Canyon, the Redwood Forest, the Amazon, the Serengeti. Wilderness, for me, captures God's interpretation of beauty. My first reactions to the word are wholly positive.

Sorrow creeps in only when I recall how wilderness places are shrinking because of human interference; for example, the clearing of the old growth forests for farmland in New England when Europeans first colonized this country. It's marvelous that we've essentially replanted the Northeast, generated new forests, but they don't have the feeling of wilderness. We've changed the wilderness in our need for coal and oil and wood. The ancient philosophers always spoke of the ethical life as a life of moderation, but human nature has always had difficulty recognizing "enough." Many people are now seeing the importance of preserving wilderness, experiencing the grief of the lost wild places.

The Bible could be seen as bearing some responsibility for our failure to value wilderness sooner. In the Bible, the wilderness is the place of testing, as in the gospel reading, the place where Jesus encounters the devil. The wilderness in the Old Testament is usually synonymous with desert. It is the place where Israel wanders for forty years after escaping from slavery in Egypt. There they experience thirst and hunger to the extreme. Wilderness is a desolate place, a dangerous place, a place where people are lost and where people die.



I seldom think of deserts as wilderness, though they clearly are. I don't think about them as places of beauty. The irony here is that this is the only kind of wilderness that we are making more of today. Even while global warming is resulting in the rising level of the oceans, we see new deserts created in the rain forests that we have cut down.

So, wilderness in the Bible is a dangerous place, a place of testing, a place scarce in food and water, a place where the devil dwells, a desolate place. But this is not the whole story. The wilderness is also the place where Israel is free, no longer enslaved. The wilderness is the place where God's people are given living water to satisfy their thirst, where manna from heaven offers them daily bread. The wilderness is the place where the Israelites first encounter God, where they receive the law that shows them how to live in harmony with God and with one another.

The wilderness, in fact, becomes a symbol for the place where faith grows. When life is hard, we sometimes imagine it as a kind of desert, a place where goodness and life is difficult to see. In those times when we imagine ourselves abandoned by God, we feel the heat of the desert by day and its chill by night. We sometimes imagine that if only we didn't have to struggle so hard for our daily bread, that things would be alright; if only we had more money or more power, we'd really begin to do well. In the desert, the dry places, we experience the same temptations as Jesus did in the desert: food wealth and power would get us to the top. If we could just get out of the desert, leave the wilderness....

Here's the thing we forget: deserts do bloom. It doesn't happen often. It rains so little. But there are few things more beautiful than the desert after a good soaking. We need wilderness in order to understand the grandeur of God. We need wilderness to remind us of our utter dependence upon God. We need wilderness to remember that God is not tame, not inclined to satisfy our every whim. We need wilderness to recognize how barren life can be not just for us, but for so many others. Wilderness teaches us compassion. It strengthens faith. It calls us to prayer and even in the wilderness that we call desert, there comes a day when it teaches us to sing. It is a place that we wander and more importantly a place that we wonder about the mercies and the glory of God. Wilderness lays us low while lifting us up. It humbles and exalts. As the psalmist says, "Behold the goodness of the Lord..."



