

Primary Text: Luke 4.1-13

We all have our *wilderness* stories, though we probably don't call them by this name. They are stories of *growing up*. They are the stories of how our growth has been stunted. They are the times we are tempted to believe that there is no meaning, no purpose, no God. They are the times we are tempted to believe in only ourselves. They are the times we are tempted to believe we are worth nothing. They are stories we tell with great laughter among good friends. They are stories we tell with many tears among best friends.

*Wilderness stories...* The high school girl can not live up to the image of who she wants to be. It is an illusive image, because she already weighs less than 100 pounds and still she feels like there is too much of her. She has grown to hate anything with carbohydrates.

*Command this stone to become a loaf of bread*, says the tempter. And Jesus answers, *It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'* Jesus was being challenged to put food above God. Those who struggle with the temptations of bulimia and anorexia, are no strangers to the wilderness of that challenge – putting food in its right place.

*Wilderness stories...* Then the tempter took Jesus and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here..." Having heard recent statistics on the percentage of people who are or have considered suicide, it is hard for this wilderness story not to stir up that wilderness experience of dealing with a suicide or attempted suicide.

We all have our *wilderness stories*. I have my own *Wilderness stories...* My first day of kindergarten the excitement was too much for me. I laugh when I think of it now. When that wave of nausea came over me at lunch time and I couldn't help but send my lunch to the kid across the table from me. This was of course after I had already eaten my lunch. The kid across the table was named Dirk. It was his birthday. I laugh now, but I do dishonesty to the story if I forget the burning shame of embarrassment with

which it left me. At that moment, I wished I could be left alone in the wilderness.

*Wilderness stories...* They are the events in our lives that shape who we are and yet we don't often talk about them. Stories of being abused or stories when the rage got the best of us. Stories of being bullied because of the way we talk or walk – a certain lisp, a certain skip or lilt. Or stories of trying to show others that we're better than that kid with the lisp or the lilt or the hair that doesn't get combed very often. So we bruise them with insults that – unlike the childhood nursery rhymes told us – do hurt worse than any sticks or stones could.

In the time when Jesus set out for the wilderness, most people lived in communities that were probably more like Lakota tribes before they were sent to reservations. There were extended families living in clans together. One rarely left their home tribe to travel except for the rare festival in Jerusalem. And even that was done as a tribe or family. One's identity was shaped, controlled, and given by what group you were a part of. Going to the wilderness, alone, was out of one's comfort zone. It was anti-social behavior.

And the wilderness, at the time when Jesus set out for it, was a place where one went to face temptation. Where one went to struggle with one's own devils. And above all, where one went to heal.

In comparison to this time, our lives are marked and shaped by the boxes of individualism more than the circles of community. We live with smaller families in our boxy homes. We drive to work or school in our metal boxes – at most waving to people in other metal boxes. We work in cubicles or sit at square desks. Even at church, where many of us come closest to a circle of community, we sit in parallel rows. Which permits us to, generally, have our own individual experience of church.

In this world where we draw more of our identity from who we are as an individual than what family, tribe, or community we are a part of... I wonder if facing our temptations – dealing with our own wilderness stories, learning how to heal from them – is better done in community than alone.

Someone recently expressed interest in the grief group which Pastor Dave will be leading over the next few months. *I don't think I can do it*

*myself, but maybe with the help of others*, this person suggested. It is, after all, one of the benefits of community – learning from one another how to heal. Learning from one another how to grow in the midst of and through our wilderness stories.

I was taught within the last few weeks about healing. I visited someone who knows something of a wilderness story. Abuse. Physical pain. But with the help of friends – with the help of a community – this person created a *simple space for healing*... A comfortable chair near a window with a view of the hills. A place where this person could journal through wilderness stories.

This person told me – *I rarely feel like I get the readings on Sunday morning. With all the potential distractions* (and I would add with all the directions one could go with each reading) *I often take the bulletin home with me in order to go over the readings again*, this person told me, *journal my way through them, reflect more on where God is working in the text and in my life.*

For me, the image of this person sitting there in that corner of a house which has been designated for healing... this is a most powerful image for the wilderness that we speak of throughout Lent. Turning to the readings each week as if they were bottomless wells in the middle of a desert. Sitting with the texts and allowing them to shift in and out of focus with our lives. Asking questions... Where does the story challenge us? Where does the story comfort us? What does the story call us to? We could sit with a text for a whole week and not have gotten to the bottom of the text, not plumbed its depths... not explored all the ways that God's grace comes to us through it.

I don't know about you, but I have found it a simple mystery of life that the *wilderness stories* – the places where I burn with the shame of embarrassment – when I work through them they are also great sources of healing. It may seem illogical, but exploring the *wilderness stories* in my life can be like finding a bottomless well in the midst of a desert.

Another *wilderness story* from when I was in kindergarten, but I promise this one doesn't involve nausea or vomiting. I have a vivid image, like some Van Gogh painting of haystacks, of me standing out on the wintery, prairie playground. The other kids are playing off together. For whatever reason. I stand alone. And as I stand there, I have such a wave of

sadness come over me. So deep I could feel it from the bottom of my toes to the bottom of my heart.

Who knows, where exactly the sadness came from. If we used the framework of the story from Luke today, perhaps I'd personify the sadness as the Devil. What I do remember is the sadness having to do with missing my parents during those long days at school as a kindergartener. I had grown to depend on them for everything and now they weren't there. I was alone.

But, as this was the wintery, tundra of north-central North Dakota, I remember *finding consolation* by hugging a large chunk of snow and ice. Wrapping my arms tightly around the frozen mass, tightly pressing it against my winter jacket.

This *wilderness story* of mine is, in fact, now the first chapter I can remember of my larger *wilderness struggle* with depression. And telling this chapter of my *wilderness story*, exploring it for wells of meaning, is one of the ways I have found to turn this *wilderness story* into a source of healing – a bottomless well in the midst of the desert that sometimes can be life.

We speak of disciplines in Lent. For me, this reading from Luke encourages us to look at disciplines in a new way... Lent can be about finding a wilderness place like a corner of our home, or joining a grief or depression support group, or having a simple conversation with a counselor or a friend, all in order to tell our wilderness stories... So that we can draw from them as sources of healing. So that we can hold the frozen, icebergs of our wilderness stories of grief or pain tightly to our chests and have them transformed from painful, frozen stories in our past, to sources of comfort and warmth.

And I know it sounds odd, but I think the reminder of Lent is that *God has given us the gift of wilderness*. God has filled this abundant earth with places of wilderness. Wilderness places – not just places of solitude and beauty, but places for us to heal. God provides these places.

And God fills our lives with wilderness stories – not that God causes pain in our lives like some masochistic presence. But where there is wilderness, God places a bottomless well. Where there is despair, God brings bottomless sources of hope for us. Where there is pain, God provides bottomless wells of healing.

Amen.