

Sermon March 10th

God Equips Us to Face the Wilderness

It is April 1999. I am only a few months away from graduating high school. The last six months I have really struggled to keep it together. The environment at home is chaotic. My Mother and Sister are fighting all the time. My Father isn't talking to my Mother or my Sister. And my Father has nothing good to say about them when I meet up with him on Sunday mornings. Their feelings towards my Dad are mutual, and I get to hear their negative comments daily.

A few kids at school felt this is the year that they would bully me relentlessly. I am failing in most of my classes. I am getting into things that are not good for me.

I am lonely. A girl who I have liked for the past few months didn't feel the same way. Meanwhile all my friends have girlfriends. I feel anxious, hurt, confused. I cry uncontrollably. This has lasted for weeks. I can't even get out of bed most days. I have been thinking scary thoughts about what it would be like if I was not here. And now I have hit rock bottom. I am done. I sit down at my computer and write a long email to a few close friends telling them what they mean to me, and that I can't deal with the pain anymore.

My Mom comes home from work and offers to make supper. For the umpteenth time I say I am not hungry. I can't remember the last time I felt like eating something. I go to my room and sit in darkness thinking about my pain. Thinking about ending my pain.

It has been a couple of hours, but it feels like forever. I have yet to act on my thoughts. I fall to my knees and pray. I cry out to God for help. I spend hours lamenting. Hoping that I could feel anything different. I am exhausted. I want to end it all, but don't feel the energy to follow through. I pass out from exhaustion.

I wake up. It is around lunch time. I am still here. I didn't do it. But I feel different. It is hard to explain, but I don't feel the despair that burdened me last night. That burdened me over the past few months.

My friend walks in all worried that I had done something to myself, and asks me what happened. I can't explain it. I just feel different.

It wasn't until years later that I actually looked back on this time in my life, and realized that God was walking with me as I faced this wilderness called depression. God listened to my prayers. God's love and grace was dwelling inside me through the Holy Spirit comforting me and encouraging me to hang on. God pointed me to stories in Scripture where people were lifted from their despair. Giving me hope to live another day. God invited friends into my life who actually cared about my well-being. The friend who walked in that morning was someone I grew up with from my congregation. And then years earlier God convinced my parents to get us a dog who during my whole time with depression laid beside me listening to me cry. God equipped me with what I needed to face the wilderness.

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent. A forty-day journey where we often reflect on the wilderness we face in our lives and the practices, gifts, and community God equips us with to face this wilderness with hope. When we receive ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Or in other words we are fragile people living in a world where we often find ourselves wandering in the wilderness.

We receive these ashes in the sign of the cross to remember that Christ walks with us equipping us to face the wilderness in our lives. Redirecting us to prayer, worship, the Bible, and our neighbor.

In the Torah we hear stories about the Israelites as they wander in the desert forty years hoping to reach the Promise Land. Often times they lament to God for help. Longing to be fed. God gives them what they need to survive the wilderness. Manna to eat. Water to drink. The Ten Commandments to guide them. And a story they can retell generation after generation of God's saving love experienced in Egypt. Giving the people hope. Inspiring the people to support God's mission for the world. Even in the wilderness.

For Jesus he is in the wilderness for forty days. Jesus is hungry. Vulnerable. Lonely. Jesus is tempted to use his power to create food. To rule the world. To even test God's saving power. Jesus is facing temptations that seem too overwhelming to overcome.

And yet, Jesus has the Spirit in him to give him the strength he needs to endure. Jesus has the Word of God written in his heart to help him deal

with temptation after temptation. Jesus is given what he needs so that God's ministry will prevail. Even in the wilderness.

For the early church their wilderness is the persecution and inner strife they keep facing as they try to continue to live out Christ's mission for the world. In our reading this morning, Paul invites them to trust in God's saving work. Paul invites them to see that through Christ Jesus they are equipped to face the wilderness.

We all have spent time in the wilderness. Illness. Cancer. Mental Health problems. Divorce. Loneliness. Violence. Persecution. War. Grief. Oppression. Racism. Sexism. Desire. Greed. The list goes on.

As individuals. As families. As communities. As a province. As a country. As a world. We all have and do spend time in the wilderness trying to figure out how to face the wilderness with hope? How to continue to be followers of Christ as we walk in the wilderness?

Longing to see the Promised Land. Longing to experience the resurrected Christ that reassures us that at the end of our wilderness journey is new life. Is healing and redemption.

Lent invites us to journey with the Israelites, with the early church, with Jesus, with each other through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Through the wilderness where we find ourselves standing at the foot of the cross into the empty tomb where we find ourselves standing in the presence of angels hearing the good news that Jesus is not dead, but is alive.

Our stories we heard today. The stories in our own lives we reflected on today. Affirm for us that God does equip us to face the wilderness in our lives. God breathes on us the Spirit that guides us through the wilderness. That gives us the strength and hope to endure the wilderness. That gives us the grace and love to continue to live with faith in the wilderness.

God gives us the Word of God, our Bibles, to point us to God's saving work. To reassure us that no matter how rough the wilderness can seem that God's saving work will impact our lives carrying us forward to the Promise Land. To the empty tomb. To show us that God is walking with us on this journey.

And so, as we journey together this Lenten season. As we face the wilderness in our lives. May we hear the stories of God's saving action in our lives. May we feel the Spirit inside us. May we face the wilderness with hope in God's healing and redemption. Believing that at the end of this journey lies the Promise Land. The empty tomb. The resurrected Christ.

Let us pray, loving God, walk with us as we face the wilderness in our lives. Give us strength and hope to endure when the wilderness feels overwhelming. Guide us to the Promise Land. The empty tomb. Breathing new life into us. Inspiring us to continue spreading your love to all we encounter. **Amen.**