

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year B Lent 1
February 18, 2024

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

Wilderness is not a term we usually associate with the City of Boston, and, as close as many of us live to one another proximity-wise, not particularly one we use regarding Southern New England living. But what little we know about wilderness, we make up for with knowing about fog. In his memoir about learning to sail as a teenager following the death of his parents, Richard Bode writes about being stuck in the fog for the first time in his book, *First You Have to Row A Little Boat*.¹ He writes,

I continued to sail, not knowing if I was about to run aground or ram a channel marker or another boat anchored off my bow. I had no idea where I was heading, but in that dim, bewildering world I believed my only salvation was to keep moving, moving somewhere, moving anywhere, even though my sense of direction had deserted me. And then from the impenetrable core of the mist, I [remembered] the captain's voice coming at me clear as a warning horn, repeating something he had told me during one of my early sailing lessons when I pushed the tiller the wrong way and almost threw the boat into a dangerous jibe. "Let go of the tiller!" he [had said]. "Don't try to steer when you're confused!" I followed his advice, and the blue sloop did exactly what she was supposed to do. She nudged up gently into the breeze and came to a standstill. I went up on the bow and tossed the anchor overboard and sat on the foredeck, waiting for a revelation, a glimmer of light, to tell me where I was and which way I had to go.

Deep in the center of that fog there was no shoreline, no guiding star, no rising sun, no setting moon... What I had to do was sit calmly on the deck and empty my mind of all its perceived notions and prejudices about the nature of fog, and then I would be able to detect the one constant in the swirling mist that would set me on my rightful course.

The Israelites journeyed through the wilderness for forty years, Noah was in the midst of the storm for forty days, and so we have some fairly significant biblical precursors to the forty days

¹ Once a gift to me, and now a long-time favorite book: <https://www.amazon.com/First-You-Have-Little-Boat/dp/0446670030>. And no, you don't have to be a sailor or nautically-inclined to enjoy it. For more on what Bode is describing in terms of coming up 'into the breeze', which means the front/ bow of the boat pointed directly into the wind, thereby bringing the boat to a standstill, and some other physics fun, this might assist: <https://www.phys.unsw.edu.au/~jw/sailing.html>

of Jesus in the wilderness. Each is a story of a new, or compelled, beginning. Each is a story, steeped in metaphor, of liberation which comes at the cost of certainty; at the cost of familiarity.

I'd guess that when we read this portion of scripture, that we each come up with our own physical image of wilderness, particular, even peculiar, to us from our varied experiences. It might be desert, or forest, the anonymity of a city, or the isolation of not speaking the language of a place, or navigating the MBTA when all the trains are replaced by buses which all pretty much look the same. The Spirit, in this morning's gospel, only just descended on Jesus and named him as beloved, drove him into to that place of wilderness, which can read at first as a version of holy hazing—commanding Jesus to do something he doesn't want to do, something which feels treacherous or set up for failure at great cost. But perhaps we are reading our own versions of wilderness into this story- and the place Jesus is driven towards isn't actually dangerous, just liminal—in between.

The more I consider these texts every year, the less the wilderness seems like the jungle or desert or wild vista that I see on television survival shows, and instead more like Bode's description of the fog he encountered. True wilderness is being unsure whether each step we take is actually moving us forward, or even in the general direction of where we want to go. Wilderness in this scripture is not having control over the parts of our existence which we want to have control over. Wilderness is an invitation into the deeming the 'unknowing' stretches of our lives holy and very much in the presence of God, even though we aren't aiming high, or doing well, or looking ahead. It comes upon us when when simply moving for movement's sake becomes our primal instinct. Wilderness is a place we must stop when we encounter the holy, or miss the holy, or our soul desperately needs to find itself solely reliant, solely dependent on the love of God.

Wilderness, or fog, or whatever rattles our own foundations, will make each of us wish to keep moving, to avoid the discomfort, the frustration of having a familiar shoreline obscured. It's tempting to conflate being in a wilderness season as being lost, and those can overlap significantly. But they are not the same. Being lost indicates knowing where you want or need to be, and you are not there. Being in the wilderness leaves the geographic framework out—we simply may not recognize fully where we are at this particular moment or season.

Our collect today reminds us of the temptations Jesus encountered while in this wilderness time, and which we do as well—and that this is a season to leaving those temptations behind, of considering sacrifice as a penitential option for our Lenten spiritual practices. However, Jesus' sojourn into the wilderness was not a test—the wording in the Gospel of Mark is clear that it was Satan who tested Jesus, not the wilderness itself. Satan's temptations were regarding Jesus' response to the wilderness—how he might escape it, avoid it, conquer it.

The season of Lent is about leaving behind the old routines—the nicely ordered schedule and life and turning it all on its head. Lent isn't a physical sojourn for most of us, but rather an upsetting of the order that makes us feel secure and validated. When we choose to be or practice differently, we are forced to slow down, to notice our choices more often, because all that we are used to relying on and doing out of habit is altered just enough so that it makes us aware of our actions. It is akin to waking up in someone else's house or after a move—the coffee and toaster are in a different place, and it takes a few more minutes to reorient yourself.

Why this reorientation or rather, this disorientation? Why do we need wilderness? Even more, why did Jesus need the wilderness? I think it has to do with understanding how our very being is in relation to God. The wilderness is tied to our baptism, God's own connection and relationship announced not to the world (as Morgan said last week, that happens at the Transfiguration nearly eight chapters later, when God announced it to Peter, James and John), but to Jesus himself: "You are my Son, the Beloved. In you I am well pleased."

Speaking, dwelling on, even vaguely considering that intimate relationship we have with God is not something we consider an outwardly productive practice. But it is what will ground us as we enter the very real and true wildernesses of our lives, which may not involve (at least explicitly) Satan and wild beasts, but rather nuanced and still very real incarnations of them both.

The monk and writer Thomas Merton offers what has been called a 'prayer that everyone can pray', in his book *Thoughts in Solitude*:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.²

The Good News of the long stretch of wilderness is that Jesus was not left alone. The promise of Lent is that if we hallow and make holy the wildernesses we inevitably will find ourselves in, then we will be drawn closer to our core, our being, our Creator. But to enter into the wilderness means that we give up all that we know, that we throw the maps away, that we turn off our GPS and sit in the fog. And see it not as divine punishment, but instead as invitation to go back to our

² So, I misquoted Merton on Sunday: the quote that this is a 'prayer that everyone can pray' is actually from Fr. James Martin, SJ referring to this prayer. I first heard this prayer when listening to a favorite podcast, and Fr. Martin was the guest speaker: <https://onbeing.org/blog/thomas-mertons-prayer-that-anyone-can-pray/>

beginnings, as Bode wrote, without perceived notions or prejudices about the nature of the season.

And trust that even in the moments of unknowing, the same Spirit that was present at our baptism, which has been marked on our heads as a sign of grace, and with ashes as a sign of our mortality, will be with us in the wilderness as well. And that very same Spirit will remind us of the one constant in the swirling mist, set us on our rightful course, and bring us to a place where we can do the ministry and mission that we are called to do.

AMEN.