

## Sermon: March 1, 2020- Lent 1- Walkabout

Let us pray, in your grace and love O God, we gather here together today for worship. As we begin journey through this season of Lent together, we do so knowing that you are with us; that you are not just guiding us, but importantly simply present with us in this time. WE pray now for our worship to be filled in love and joy and I pray that the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts, may be acceptable unto our redeemer. Amen.

In the Australian aboriginal community, there is a spiritual practise known as a walkabout. It is a rite of passage for male youth between the ages of 10-16. The intent of the walkabout is to step into the wilderness for as long as six months with the intention that the time alone in the wilderness will help the youth to transition spiritually and traditionally into adulthood. This practise has, like many traditional practises in our world, been co-opted into a more mainstream practise in Australia where youth of all different cultures upon the completion of school and prior to entering into the work force or beginning post secondary education go on a walkabout. However, it no longer specifically holds an understanding, as it does in the aboriginal communities, about spiritually transitioning into adulthood; instead it now has become a practise of taking time to discover new things, new places, new situation. It is a break, a way to live life differently before entering whatever next step one is planning to make.

I wanted to bring this up this morning, particularly the idea that a walkabout in the wilderness is intended to transition ones spirituality, because we as Christian people have just entered into the season of Lent, which in many ways fits with the traditional understanding of what a walkabout is and was. Lent is supposed to be a time where we, like Jesus did so many years ago, enter the wilderness and transition spiritually from one place into the next. It's not necessarily about discovering new places or new things, it's about discovering and seeking growth in our faith.

A colleague of mine talked about the wilderness of Lent in this way in his blog this week, "The wilderness is a place of discovery, a place set apart from our daily lives where we might take the time for some self-examination, wondering and visioning. A place to figure things out, about who we are, how we are, where we're going and how we might get there. If you're giving something up, taking something on, praying more diligently, or engaging in some form of Lenten practice this year, that should be your goal. Not simply the doing of it, but the why of doing it." The wilderness of Lent really should be about transitioning, it should be about discovering not a new place, but discovering who we are and whose we are.

As you know in a couple of months I will be beginning a sabbatical leave and large part of my sabbatical is built around this exact context; entering into the wilderness, taking intentional time to be in the unknown in order to rediscover God's call in my life and maybe hear that call in new and wonderful ways. It is intentionally about seeking to spiritually transition and grow so that I can be a better leader, so that I can offer my gifts in more profound ways. But what I have discovered is that like the call to enter into the wilderness of Lent, people struggle greatly with the logistics of entering into the wilderness. When folks have asked me what I plan to do on my Sabbatical, I respond with saying that at least three weeks of it will include walking into the woods and remaining in the wilderness.

The most common response to me saying I am walking into the woods is, "I am so scared for you." My father, who is not a outdoors man at all said, "like walk into the woods alone....you know there

are bears in the woods right?" Some people have understood and said, "wow that would be an amazing experience, I think your crazy, but amazing nonetheless."

What I have discovered is that people seem to be quite wary of wilderness experiences, particularly when it sounds like we will be alone in them. I wonder how many of you were shocked to hear the age of the you entering into their walkabout. When I said that 10-16 year old youth enter alone into the wilderness I wonder how many of you went, nope, may kids wouldn't be doing that? We tend to be afraid of the wilderness, tend to be fearful like my dad is, about what might lurk in the shadows of the unknown. And partly that is because we know that in the wilderness there are things that will absolutely be beyond our control. If you are speaking of physically stepping into the wilderness there is weather, and lack of food and indeed large animals that one may need to be wary of. If you enter in a metaphorical wilderness of the mind and heart, one must still face uncertainty; for what if some deep profound question that you ponder opens something within you that you thought you had closed, or even worse makes you change your mind about something.

Ultimately thought what I believe worries us the most about wilderness experiences, such as a walkabout or Jesus's experience in the wilderness, is that they are incredibly lonely, and there is no one there with you to help you traverse the unknown and to face the deep questions that will arise in your heart and mind. For example, we look to Jesus experience of entering the wilderness and he didn't have just a nice little camping trip, no he was tested by devil three times. He was offered great and wonderful things, he was offered what humans often seek the most, security, self sufficiency, power and control. Its fearful to think that when in the wilderness you might be offered that which would make your life so much simpler and even though you know it to be wrong, when alone how can you say no? How can you turn down those invitations? How do you deal with all that could happen? I think back to the one comment I had, "That wilderness experience would be amazing, I think your crazy, but amazing nonetheless."

We tend to think to look at someone like Jesus and say he got through it, because he is Jesus. And don't get me wrong I think Jesus was pretty amazing and did indeed have a level of understanding far beyond anything that we have. But the truth of the matter for me is that whether it is us entering into the actual wilderness or a Lenten wilderness, like Jesus did so many years before, no matter what we are never alone.

If you remember this account from Matthew well, what you will also remember is that just prior to the wilderness account in all of the gospels is an account of Jesus baptism and in all the accounts of the baptism there is one line, that often gets overlooked or gets understood in a certain way; that line is that the Spirit of God came upon him. The literal meaning of those words is that the Holy Spirit came into Jesus, around Jesus, was with Jesus. Our reading today then began with the words, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness." Which means that he was not alone. If you follow the story all the way to Pentecost Sunday, then you will also know that the Holy Spirit came upon all the believers and led them into new ways of being and doing.

Fast forward a couple thousand years to us and we to believe that the Holy Spirit resides around us and within us which means that truthfully we are never alone, and God is always with us, always present. I hear about this all the time when people say I found a strength I didn't know I had, the words just came out of my mouth, I could feel someone else with me. That is the Holy Spirit, that is the presence of God guiding us in the everyday. The fear of being alone, the fear of not knowing how to

handle situations or questions that may arise in the wilderness of Lent, should not stop from entering the wilderness. For no matter what, we are never truly alone and God will and can work through us in ways that we cannot even imagine. So I invite you friends to enter into the wilderness of the Lenten season. Enter a time of transitioning, challenge your Spirituality, ask hard questions, figure out why you believe what you believe. Let the Spirit guide you in the next five weeks to learn and to be open to growing in your faith; for no matter what, even though it can be tough, you will never be alone.

For it is the wilderness that we learn how to live in the love that Jesus offers, because when given the opportunity to have power, security, and control, with the Spirits guiding we can learn to share, to be inclusive and equitable and love more fully than we can imagine. May it be so with all us. Today and always. Amen.

And thanks be to God for that. Amen.