

Sermon: March 22, 2020- Lent 4- In the wilderness indeed!

Let us pray, gracious God you call us to be a people of faith; which means that we must learn to see you always, in the great and wonderful times and in the times that are anxiety producing and harsh. May we indeed know you fully and experience your grace as we have gathered together today. May all that we offer be acceptable unto you our Lord. Amen.

If someone had told me, three weeks ago, that I would be spending the vast majority of this Lenten season not only out of the pulpit, but mostly at home I wouldn't have believed them. If someone had told me that I would need to quickly learn how to organize us all into an online worship, because that would be the only way we could gather; I would have laughed at it. All of that would have seemed so far fetched; and yet here we are. This is by far the strangest Lent I have seen; probably that any of us have seen. Each and every year we are called to engage in the season of Lent, a season of self reflection, a season of prayer, a season of engaging the wilderness experience in the hopes that we can learn something new about ourselves and something new about how our faith guides our lives; but for the most part the wilderness is metaphorical, it is something we talk about rather than experience first hand.

But this year the call to the wilderness is extreme. The call to socially distance, the call to stay home, the call to find new ways to communicate and engage with one another, while not coming into contact; well that is a wilderness that I, nor any of us could have ever imagined. And yet this is our reality, we quite literally are isolated in the wilderness of this time, isolated in the wilderness of trying to rediscover who we are, how we can manage, what's most important to us and how our faith can guide us through this really complicated time. And it's tough, wow its tough. WE are trying to ere on the side of grace and love for our neighbour, but also wanting to protect ourselves. WE are trying to connect with people in meaningful non-physical ways, and yet want so badly to embrace those we love. It's tough to be in this wilderness; its tough to no longer understand the wilderness as just a metaphor, but something we are actually living.

I began to wonder this week, what is it about this wilderness experience that is so tough for us? Absolutely it is the unknown; the not knowing how long this wilderness experience will continue. Not knowing how much worse it might

get. It is tough because of the anxiety that is produced as we watch people become unwell, and worry for them and for those who are caring for them. It is tough, because of the effect that this experience is having on the economy and the long-term worries connected to that. It is tough, because I never wanted to be a teacher and now, I have to help my children learn from home (God help them) It is tough, because there are those among us who have closed their business, in the hopes of caring for their community and yet will be worried about what that might mean long term. Its tough because this virus is no joke. All around it's tough.

But there is something else that is making this experience really tough and it took me a few days before I began to pinpoint what it was; I think this wilderness experience is tough for us all because we have lost control; you see we are so use to the narrative of our lives to this point, a narrative that we have, for the most part written and are happy with; and yet now its changed into a narrative that we no longer can control and no longer recognize, and that produces uncertainty, anxiety and even fear. We try to regain control, by trying to convince ourselves that we still have control, by saying things like, "well this cannot last that long, because everything has to get back to normal." Or "they don't really expect me to be in my home for two months, right? They know I need to go out and talk with people before the end of may." But no matter how hard we try; the narrative of our lives has changed. The catch phrase of the week, "I guess this is our new normal," is true and that is, what I think makes this wilderness tough, so much has changed and we simply don't know how to respond to this lack of control over our lives, over everything.

Jesus, we are told on his way back to galilee stopped in the Samaritan town of Sychar and rested by the well of Jacob. As he did an unnamed woman from the city approached the well in heat of the day to draw water for her household. There are clues in those words that we must pay attention to. People don't normally collect water from wells in the heat of the day and traditionally at this time, those who collected water, would have done so with others. But this woman is alone, unnamed and gathers water at a time of day when others would not be present, because it was simply too hot to drawing water. Even that little piece of this scripture tells us that this woman is in a wilderness of her own, that the narrative of her life is one where she has been told and maybe even recites

for herself, that she has little value, has little worth. This is a woman living on the margins, unseen and unheard.

And yet in one moment all of that changes. Everything she expected to happen at the well does not happen. She likely expected to go and to gather water and then to return home, but she doesn't actually do that; the text tell us she leaves her bucket after speaking with Jesus, she never actually gathers the water she went to the well for. Instead she meets this man at the well, a man that after speaking with, she rightly names as the Christ. This woman who was alone in the wilderness of her life discovers that she has a voice and she runs to gather the people, that she had sought hard to avoid, to tell them that the story of her life, the narrative of her life, had changed and the text tell us that they come to believe, not because they met Jesus at the well, but because of her story, because of what she shared with them about her experience at the well; they come to believe because of the way her narrative had changed. That day was a blessing for her and for her community. And it happened in place and time that she had no control over what so ever, it happened even though it went against the narrative that she and others had told her about her self; in the midst of the unknown she finds a new way of being.

That really is, biblically speaking, what the wilderness was all about, finding a new of being, a new way of seeing the world, a new way of experiencing ourselves in the story of life. This woman's normal and scripted trip to the well, became something that she would have never expected; the narrative of her life changed, there was a blessing in the unknown. There are blessings in the wilderness, but where do we find the blessings in this wilderness?

You all know that I would never suggest that God would cause something like this virus to teach a lesson, so please do not hear that in what I am about to say; but I do know that there are lessons in every wilderness of our lives, there are always blessings in the harshest of environments, so what might that be for us in the now? What in this wilderness that we are living in, can we learn from and pay attention to, and what will be a blessing in the days to come? One of the blessings I have seen is the reminder of just how important my community is; just how much each of the members of this faith community means to me, means to all of us; how easily we can take that for granted. One of the blessings is just how

important our health care workers are to us, how important our teachers and EA's and school system is to us, how important the cleaning staff's are to us, how important grocery clerks are to us, how important truck drivers are to us; for we certainly have taken them all and their work for granted.

One of the blessings that I have seen is that people are finding ways to remain connected. I watched my sons each have a music lesson on line this week and I watched the joy of their faces when they got to see their friends, not just hear them or text with them, but see them in an online gathering. No, its not perfect they should be able to run and play with their friends, its not okay that they have to connect online, its not okay that they cannot connect physically, but that moment will remain with them, and they will always remember how important the time they have together really is.

What blessings have you seen? We certainly have seen the harshness, the worry, the anxiety, maybe even the fear, but in this time of very little control, control what you can, rewrite the narrative that you are living. What blessings have you seen?

And once this time is over, when its once again safe to gather in church, to go out with friends to our favourite restaurants, to go to Roger's place to watch a hockey game, or sit in the movie theatre, will you let those blessing form the new narrative you live? I hope so. I hope that all of us comes away from this time with new appreciations for our neighbours, our loved ones and our communities, all that we have and hold so dear. I hope that is the story we will tell and that that story is what will encourage others to share their blessings with us. What blessings have you seen? For it is in those blessings that we find God's love and care. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.