

Leaning into the Wilderness

Mark 1: 12-13

¹² [After Jesus was baptized] the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

In the movie *Frozen 2* there is a scene where the happy-go-lucky snowman, Olaf is wandering through the enchanted wilderness when odd things begin to happen. A gust of wind picks him up and plops him back down on the ground. Objects fall from the sky in front of him. He hears a whisper in the breeze and wonders if it's an imaginary friend named, "Samantha." Olaf responds by convincing himself that these things are "normal" and that, "This will all make sense when I am older." I couldn't help but think of Olaf this week as we wander into Lent this year; into this odd pandemic wilderness while wondering if this will all make sense to us someday.

The truth is we have been in the wilderness for a lot longer than forty days. Actually, it feels like we've been in Lent since last March. And while we may have found some sort of normality to our routines, there is still a sinking feeling in our guts that this is anything but normal. It is not normal to measure ourselves six feet apart from our neighbor. It is not normal for us to postpone funeral services and suspend our grief. For Ash Wednesday this year, some churches administered ashes by drive thru. As cars came through, they would put ashes on people's foreheads using Q-tips. I mean it's a creative alternative, but is it normal? Our bodies and minds have clicked into overdrive; it feels like we are floating in space where even the small things can feel overwhelming. To be in this vortex for as long as we have, it just isn't normal.

Before his ministry begins, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. He is still dripping wet from his baptism; still emerged in God's affirmation, when the text says a Spirit-gust pushes him into the wilderness where he is tested. It is the place where his identity is tested. His motivations are tested. I imagine his faith is tested. If you are anything like me, perhaps you can relate to some or all three of these over the past year. In desert times do we not begin to wonder who we really are and why we are doing what we do? The question might enter our minds, "Does God really care?" Why am I not healed yet? Why have 2.5 million people perished from Covid-19 worldwide? What can I do? I mean, I can't even fix my own problems, how in the world am I to take on issues like hunger, or racism, or climate change? And inside of these existential questions, does not our faith get tested as we wonder who we are? I mean, how could it not? Before his ministry begins, the Spirit drives Jesus into the place where I imagine he wrestles with these deeply human questions, like we do.

But notice how Jesus responds. In some accounts he fasts. Other have Jesus wrestling with the voice of the Accuser. Here we read the angels are sent to serve him. You see what Jesus is doing? Jesus is leaning in, and he allows God—he needs God—to minister to him.

Now I am not sure about you, but I think most of us do whatever we can to escape these kinds of situations. But what if the wilderness is a necessary part of our process? What if Jesus needed the wilderness to figure out that who he is isn't wrapped up in other people's approval, or living into the world's expectations of who a savior is and what a savior does? What if it was in this uncomfortable place where he learned that the only way he was going to minister to others was by allowing God to minister to him. At our presbytery level, one of the committees is dedicated to preparing seminary students for ministry. We would often hear that these students didn't quite feel like a minister until they spent some time being a chaplain in the hospital. Praying with the dying. Comforting the grieving. Being with people who were in impossible wilderness situations. It was the place where the only way any of us could make it was by leaning into it and allowing God—needing God—to sustain us.

So here is the question I'm wrestling with as we limp into Lent: how are we allowing God to minister to us? You see, my hunch is that even as we are doing our best to take care of ourselves and practice self-care, which is a good and important thing to do right now, at some point in the wilderness, even our self-sustaining resources are limited. And as important as it is to care for each other, that is limited as well *because we are limited*. So inside of the struggle, when the bottom falls out, or before the bottom falls out, how are we allowing God minister to us? Maybe it happens when we get a moment to reflect as Cristy sings and Anna plays. Maybe we set aside time to read the Lenten devotionals and pray with our morning coffee. We might not have definitive answers, but we can make space.

So during the next several weeks of Lent, on Tuesdays and Wednesdays I will have some open space for one-on-one appointments, where we can sit in the sanctuary—socially distanced of course—and we can pray or light a candle and create space so can God minister to us. Because in the wilderness place, notice that not even Jesus can keep going on his own strength.

Soon, we hope, we will have all been vaccinated and we will be through this season. And perhaps, looking back, this will all make sense when we are older. But until then, maybe we lean in, allowing God's love and care to nurture us. I mean, how could Jesus ever possibly minister to the world without allowing God to minister to him? Which raises the obvious question for us: how can we?