

WILDERNESS TESTS



Scripture:

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



WILDERNESS TESTING

Testing. We tend to hate it, but we know we need it to succeed. And sometimes our survival depends on training and testing.

My son, Ian, just had a week of re-testing to see if he still remembered how to get out of his Coast Guard helicopter if it crashes into the ocean. The pilots strap into a simulator that is like the inside of the helicopter cabin. It is suddenly turned upside down into a cold dark tank of water.

As the cold water rushes in, the pilot must reorient him or herself, get out of their straps and seatbelts, get the helicopter door open and swim to the surface wearing a forty pound uniform full of rescue gadgets. All of these maneuvers must be accomplished in dark extremely cold water. Scary, huh? Especially for their mothers.

Yet I am so glad he is preparing for these worst case scenarios. We all need training and preparation tests at times in our lives to challenge us to learn something new or help us more effectively help others. Right? Amen? But hopefully for us, our training doesn't involve an evil image like Satan conducting the testing!

JESUS' TEMPTATION AND TESTING

This passage today could be described as the story of Christ's rescue training. The temptation and testing of Jesus was meant to prepare him for the things to come in his future and in ours. He would have to withstand challenges like almost being thrown off a cliff, being mocked by the Pharisees, being hailed and worshipped in a parade on Palm Sunday, and the next week being spit at and whipped when he was accused of sedition by the Roman government, and finally being denied and betrayed by his own disciples as he went to the cross. His ministry was full of challenges and this wilderness time made Christ physically, emotionally and spiritually ready.

JESUS' BAPTISM

Did you notice how the book of Mark jumps right into Christ's preparation for

ministry? No nativity story, no wise men, no Magnificat sung by his mother Mary, not even a mention of the shepherds in the fields.

Mark starts with the baptism of Jesus by the "wildman," John the Baptist.

John was a man of the wilderness. He wore animal skins and ate locusts. Can you imagine how bad he must have smelled? Today he would win all the survivor competitions. John the baptizer knew wilderness survival and how to faithfully follow God's call no matter where it would lead. For John that meant following God's call to the wilderness, then to the Jordan, and finally to his beheading in the hands of Herod. In Islam, John the Baptist is one of the twenty-five prophets they revere. There is a Muslim shrine of John the Baptist in Damascus.

Jesus' baptism by a survivor of the wilderness was an omen of what was to come for Jesus. No high priests from the synagogue blessed him. John had no official title to do his work except as the messenger who fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. John was "the messenger" Isaiah predicted many years before, who would be sent to "prepare the way of the Lord."

Jesus requests that John baptize him. Then a Spirit in the form of a dove blesses Jesus with a voice from God identifying him as God's beloved son. Then in the next breath that same Spirit pushes Jesus into the wilderness. It seems like he was given a blessing and then a curse, doesn't it?

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite author preachers, encourages us to imagine Jesus, his hair still wet from baptism forced out into the wilderness immediately after receiving a blessing from God. The dove that blesses him at his baptism turns into a guide dove and leads him to his testing grounds. In her book: *The Bread of Angels*, Taylor calls this passage 'The

Wilderness Exam.’ She says: “This is chiefly a story about Jesus’ identity. And insofar as we belong to him, then it is a story about our identity, too. There are many times when we are tempted to believe we deserve more than what we have. We want food, fame and fortune, all three.

The devilish voice in our head says, “If you are a child of God, shouldn’t things be going smoother for you? If you are really a Christian, then shouldn’t you be happier, healthier, richer, and safer?”

Taylor asks, “You know how to answer the devil back, right? You say, ‘Away with you, Shoo! I would rather be a hungry child of God than a well fed player on the Devil’s team. Now go away, Devil. Shoo!’”

If you can manage that attitude when the temptation to be discontented comes into your mind, then chances are another voice in your head will be heard. It is a voice that is ten thousand times more beautiful, saying to you, “This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.”

For us humans to trust that Jesus fully understands humanity, he had to go through the wilderness preparation and rescue training so we would believe he truly understands our temptations, sufferings, hunger, and the seduction of power.

A LESSON FOR US

That time in the wilderness was clearly a lesson for us. Jesus role modeled what humility, peaceful behavior, unselfish actions, extreme patience and obedience to God looks like.

I do not believe God purposely tests us to see how faithful we are. Our world is imperfect, the kingdom of God is not finished yet, and random things happen, not due to God’s direct hand but sometimes because of our own stupid actions, or simply because bad things happen randomly.

There is that random bullet that ricochets the wrong way and hits a two year old playing in her front yard. Or there is the car accident where the ones killed just happen to be driving in front of the wrong sleepy truck driver when traffic jams up suddenly. Or there is the victim of cancer who ate all the right foods, kept their weight healthy, didn’t smoke, exercised and kept their life stress free and they still ended up with terminal cancer.

Random cancer mutations account for two-thirds of many types of cancer, leaving heredity and environmental factors to account for only one-third.

HOW DO WE COPE?

So how do we cope with the randomness of trials and tribulations in this life? How can we be as strong as Jesus in the midst of the wilderness?

This passage in Mark inspires us to look at some of the wilderness places we have already experienced and ponder what we have learned. We rarely *volunteer* to go to wilderness tests or intentionally seek out struggles. Even when the challenges in front of us are of our own making we rarely actively seek hardship. But is it possible, no matter the cause, that the Holy Spirit is there alongside us to strengthen us during the challenges?

TEMPTING WHISPERS

I don’t believe that God wants us to suffer or fall into temptation. But when evil strikes, God is at work both for us and through us during those times. Have you ever attended an Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meeting? Often there are testimonies from addicts who credit their recovery on suffering and being allowed to hit bottom. Despite feeling abandoned by God and their families at the time, they testify that before they could begin the road to their recovery, they had to be humbled completely. My friends in recovery also tell me that they have to be constantly vigilant against evil because they hear a voice in their ear whispering, tempting them to believe they can control their addiction without God’s help. Their recovery is often dependent on their

being spiritually strong enough to overcome those tempting whispers.

**Evil desires our destruction.
God wants only good things for us.
Yet God knows that if our lives were
always smooth and peaceful,
we wouldn't appreciate the good
times and recognize God's grace.
We need the darkness
to be able to see the light.**

WHEN YOU ARE IN THE WILDERNESS

When you find yourself in the wilderness, ask yourself these three questions:

1. "Even though I did not wish for this, how might the Spirit be at work through this struggle?"
2. What strength and wisdom can I get out of this?"
3. How might God use me to help someone else?"

The same Spirit of God that descended upon Jesus at Baptism and drove Jesus out into the wilderness also accompanied him during that time and brought him to the angels who attended to him. Trust that God will not abandon us during our sojourns in the wilderness. Instead, be aware of the redemption and resurrection hope in the midst of chaos.

During this Lenten season ask yourself where the Spirit is calling you to engage in God's work during these forty days? Maybe God is guiding you to volunteer to help with the breakfast program one morning a month. Maybe God is encouraging you to contribute to our church's financial stability so we will have a stable future for this community? Maybe the Holy Spirit is nudging you to come alongside someone who is struggling with a physical or mental illness and you can be God's agent to help them cope.

PRAYER

Prayer increases our awareness of God's work in our lives and strengthens us for the trials and tribulations that strike us. I invite you

to learn new ways to pray as your Lenten discipline this season. Join us on Wednesday evenings for the *Prayer, Power, and Practices* study to learn some creative ways to pray.

But remember this: No matter what you do during Lent, God loves you more than you can hope for or imagine. Jesus showed us his deep, deep love by passing the wilderness test so he could save us.

So now live your life as one who has been saved, and share God's grace with those who don't realize that they, too, are loved so very much.

Benediction:

May you embrace God's love for you and go out with a stronger purpose during this Lenten season to share that love.

Go and make a joyful noise to the Lord because YOU are God's beloved.

Ephesians 2:8 reminds us: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

My hope for you is that you will spend this Lenten season embracing this gift of unconditional love.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more.
Amen



**Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
February 22, 2015**