

Welcome

Have you ever done a winter canoe trip?

I grew up in Missouri - the southern part of the state is full of rivers that make for great canoeing. One of them is spring-fed, which means even in the miserable Missouri winters, it's never frozen.

Which means you can canoe in the dead of winter, as I learned when a group of guys convinced me to join them for their annual 'crazy canoe trip'. We rented a cabin for the night, and woke up early Saturday morning to get on the river. It was about 20 degrees when we put in the water - five canoes of ten guys. Everyone was wearing at least three layers and we took a lot of care not to get water in our winter boots as we loaded into the canoes and set off down the river. It was cold at first, but we quickly warmed up, paddling down the river in our coats.

Needless to say, canoeing in February is a completely different experience from being on the river in season. It takes a lot more preparation - in addition to the normal food and camping details, we each had to pack a dry bag filled with an extra change of everything from underwear to boots and coat. We carried one dry bag full of dry wood, lighter fluid and matches, just in case we had to start a fire to warm up someone who fell in. No one did the year I went, mostly because it's amazing how much harder you try to keep your canoe from tipping over when it's below 30.

We were mostly silent, hushed by the snow and ice that blanketed the banks of the river. Not another soul was within miles, and we saw rabbits, deer and more come to the river to drink, confident that no screaming humans would bother them.

I quickly realized why these guys did this every year. It was incredibly spiritual - the silence, the snow, the animals. There was a palpable presence of God in this place, away from all the things that normally kept us comfortable in the winter.

I want to talk about wilderness places today. Because wilderness places are harsh - harsh like a river in the dead of winter. So too the wilderness times in our lives aren't necessarily fun - times of pain and suffering, times when it feels as though all the comforts of normalcy have been stripped away, when you feel lost, aimless, wondering when life is actually going to *start*.

As much as we dislike wilderness periods, we know they're inevitable. Whether you're in one now or not, we know that these times of transition are inevitable. And they're hard. No way around it.

But just like that crazy canoe trip, wilderness places don't have to *only* be hard. And if we prepare well, we can find God in those wilderness places like nowhere else. The wilderness offers a divine encounter that we simply can't get anywhere else. So today is about preparing to meet God, preparing to be amazed by the divine.

Message

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, which is when we begin preparing to celebrate Easter. Lent is a season in the Church year we set aside for self-reflection, for searching out sin in our lives so we can turn from it and turn to God. This year, our Lenten series is called The Devil in the Details. We'll be in the Gospel stories of Jesus, and in most of them, the devil shows up. We'll be exploring sin, temptation and how much the little things matter. We insist that we stop in the midst of our busy lives so we don't lose God's call in the details.

[Scripture Slide] As we begin our journey toward Easter, let's look at Jesus' first confrontation with the devil. Turn with me to Mark 1. This is the beginning of Mark's story about Jesus. Back during Advent, we saw John the Baptizer preparing the way for Jesus. Then, at the beginning of Epiphany, we saw John baptize Jesus, marking the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Today's text picks back up right there. We'll see Jesus baptized and begin his ministry, announcing God's coming kingdom. But pay attention to what happens *between* his baptism and when he embarks on God's calling - he has a run-in with Satan:

One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy."

The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.

Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" -- Mark 1:9-15

You might be more familiar with this story from the other Gospels - specifically Matthew and Luke. Those are the stories where Jesus and Satan have a pretty intense back and forth, where Satan tempts Jesus three times and Jesus resists him. In those stories, the focus of the story is the temptation itself. But Mark does something different. Mark focuses on the wilderness, and on the fact that Jesus went there *between* his calling at his baptism and the beginning of his ministry.

That's not an accident. The wilderness isn't a detour. It certainly *looks* like that, especially if you know the geography of the Holy Land. John was baptizing in the Jordan River, which formed the symbolic boundary of the Holy Land. When God freed the Israelites from Egypt, they spent 40 years waiting with God in the wilderness, and when it was time for them to enter into the Holy Land, they crossed the Jordan river.

So for Jesus to come to the Jordan and then out into the Wilderness makes it look sort of like he's leaving. But then Mark tells us he was in the wilderness for 40 days, which points back to Israel's 40 years in the wilderness.

Israel's time in the wilderness was... not great, to put it kindly. It was marked by a repeated failure to trust God. In fact, the original plan was for Israel not to spend any time in the wilderness at all. Originally they were to go in and conquer the land. But when they got to the edge of the Jordan, they lost faith. They were afraid of the peoples of the land, afraid God wouldn't be with them. So God took them back out into the wilderness for 40 years of ups and downs. 40 years of camping, essentially, while they learned to trust God to provide.

By going into the wilderness, by facing down the temptations of Satan, Jesus is acting out Israel's story. He's taking Israel's failures on himself and succeeding where they failed. Jesus is Israel in the flesh, faithful where they were faithless, hopeful where they were hopeless.

And after his 40 days of temptation, he returns, victorious and ready to announce the reign of God is at hand.

The wilderness prepared Jesus to accomplish his calling. Before we can be God's people, we have to spend time in the wilderness. We have to have the trappings of our sinful lives stripped away and be remade as God's people, ready to fulfill God's calling in the world.

It's no accident that Lent follows the season of Epiphany. Epiphany celebrates God being revealed to the world. When we see God, it's always an invitation to join in God's work. A revelation of God is always accompanied by an invitation to join God's life.

Which takes us into a wilderness place where we are reborn, transformed, made new. And we return ready to fulfill God's call in the world.

Wilderness places can actually be *good*. They can be sources of renewal, reframing. They can be times that prepare us for what's ahead.

But they're *always* hard. There's no such thing as an easy wilderness. If it were easy, it wouldn't be the wilderness. What *makes* it the wilderness is that it doesn't have all the comforts of our homes. (It's why we don't go camping in our backyards.)

This is why we look forward to the season of Lent. We know wilderness times always come. Lent invites us to prepare for them, much like we prepare to go camping. Lent sets aside 40 days to go with Jesus into the wilderness, to strip away the things that bring us comfort so we can hear God speaking to us clearly. We strip away the comforts that insulate us from the reality of our sinfulness so we can face the sins sprouting up in our lives.

I didn't grow up in a Church that observed Lent. I had never heard of it until college, when one of my good friends stopped eating ketchup (which doesn't sound like a big deal, except for the fact that this

guy ate gallons of ketchup on everything except for ice cream). I asked him where his usual ketchup allotment was, and he told me he'd given it up for Lent, introducing me to the Lenten fast.

By denying himself something he loved for 40 days, he was entering symbolically into the wilderness with Jesus. Going without reminded him that he didn't need all the things we think we need to live - he needed God and God alone. I decided to fast with him - I gave up Dr. Pepper. That was over fifteen years ago, and I've been observing Lent every year since.

I have been amazed, year after year, at how much more near God is in my life. Not because God moves, but because in the Lenten journey, I travel to God, with God. I spend six weeks making space for God to be present in my life. 40 days attending to where God is at work, what work needs to be done in me.

And Lent culminates on Easter Sunday, when we gather to celebrate Jesus' resurrection and victory over sin. Easter is about what's ahead of us, where God is taking us, the new creation God is bringing into being.

We are part of that new creation. But new creation is hard work. It's *good*, but it's hard work. Our world needs real help, divine help, help that only God can bring.

And God has chosen us, called us to be agents of healing and restoration. So we prepare for that hard work. We fast with God in the wilderness. Because the work God has for us to do is too important to be caught unaware.

Friends, this is the beginning of Lent. We're at a crossroads. We've spent the last six weeks pondering God's call on our lives, asking what God would have for us, what it means to be part of God's church.

We know the road ahead of us. We know the work God is calling us to do. The peacemaking, bridge-building and welcoming we saw Jesus do.

But before we imitate him in that work, we follow him into the wilderness. We ask God to prepare us for the work that God has called us to.

You might be in a wilderness right now. You may feel as though you're between things, waiting for your real life to begin. You may be recovering from a painful trauma - a loss or the end of a relationship, wondering what the future can possibly look like. You may be on the cusp of a new phase of life - a new relationship, a new life, an empty nest.

If that's you, if you're *in* the wilderness, you may not have prepared. You may feel left out in the cold, helpless against the elements, wondering where you're going to find the strength to go on.

Know that Lent assures us Christ is in this place with you. That doesn't make this time any less difficult, but it *does* mean you're going to make it through. Israel left the wilderness - and eventually, the

prophets looked back on that time with fondness. They realized that it was *in the wilderness* where they learned to love God most fully.

You're going to make it out of the wilderness. And one day, you'll look back with gratitude at this time. Because God is with you in a way that is difficult to express in these moments.

Let that assurance make this season of Lent a season of hope for you.

Many of us are not in the wilderness at all. This is a good season for us. Let me remind you of what you know: wilderness times come for everyone. The time to prepare for the wilderness is not when it surprises us, but now.

Lent offers us a path of preparation. By engaging in the Lenten Fast, we prepare for the work God is calling us to. Now is the time to prepare!

[Explanation of Lenten Fast]

Friends, Satan is not the only one in the wilderness. The wilderness belongs to God and even when we walk into the wilderness we go nowhere God has not already gone.

Communion + Reflection

[Communion Slide] Christ is in the wilderness with us, offering us his body as bread and blood as drink

Blessing

May God make you ready for the work God is calling you to do!