

Lent 1 Feb 22, 2015
Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15

Meet me in the Wilderness

And so our Lenten journey begins again, joining with Jesus in his preparation for his ministry, a work that will heal many lives, challenge those with authority, wealth and power, leading him to death on a cross and his final glorification through resurrection. No one said it would be an easy journey, but a journey that would make clearer to those with a listening and observing heart what the purposes of God are for human community and the creatures of the earth. What better to place to move to than the wilderness where we have to be open and aware to our environment and to our own inner thoughts if we are to survive. In the wilderness we are more open to the lessons that come from discovering our own limitations and our dependency on nature and where we will find spiritual resources for the journey. So meet me in the wilderness.

The first wilderness we find ourselves in is in the wilderness of a flood, where we encounter the destructive forces of nature. Whether we are invited back in our imaginations to

the days of Noah, thousands of years ago when he and his family faced the natural calamity of a flood, or whether we are faced with the natural calamities of nature today - flooding, snow storms, dry and parched lands, the destruction of fire, hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes....we know that when the destructive side of nature is unleashed, that we are vulnerable and can be quite helpless – our prayers are simple then – save us!

When we join Noah and his family in their time of trial, we are reminded that it is not only humans that are affected by these tragedies, but animals, birds, fish, whales, insects – wildlife, vegetation and sea life of all kinds. The struggle for survival is not just about us, but the other people around us, other nations, the creatures of the earth, the soil, the waters, the air – all are affected when nature is disturbed or seeks to rebalance herself, sometimes causing violence within the world.

We are invited in our Lenten journey to become more sensitive or re-sensitized to the rest of our creation of which we are a part, and on which we are dependent. Surely Noah

and his family, stuck on that ark for 40 days and 40 howling nights would have really figured out that message – we are all in this together and somehow we need to work together to survive and to flourish. I ponder that whenever I watch the downy woodpecker pecking away at the dying Ash tree in my backyard enjoying the ash bore that is destroying our city's canopy.

Through this ancient Hebrew story we hear the belief that it is God's intent that creation survive and flourish, the plants and animals – creatures of all kinds- including humans, who have been given the consciousness to care about all of this world, and to take responsibility ensuring the continuation of this life, as much as is within our power. Even the ancient peoples of the earth knew that we have a duty of care. The environmental movement began a long time ago indeed, but maybe people were not listening.

What is revealed in the Noah story is that God is a God of relationship, capable of repentance, desiring to protect this beautiful creation, desiring to protect the people that have emerged from the midst of the garden. And so as the rains

subside, the sun reflecting through the mists in the sky create a magnificent, prismatic stream of colour in the sky in the shape of a warrior's bow which was turned away from the earth, pointing outward to the universe. What the ancient peoples perceived was that this God that was reaching out to them wanted to protect them. In their hearts they heard a profound promise that this God would never abandon them.

For those with abandonment issues that burden their hearts, with fear of the future, with a sense of hopelessness, this is a good place to return to in our salvation story , where it all began with the promise of God to the people of Israel, the covenant that God has made with the people, with all of creation, bugs and beasts of all kinds, that we will never be abandoned by God, our Creator.

God, the lover of the world, the giver of abundant life can do nothing other than to give life to us. For our part, we need to keep learning what this means for us, to learn of our strengths, our limitations, our responsibilities, our creativity, our option for violence, our capacity for relationship. And so.... Meet me in the wilderness to reflect, to discern, to

discover what our role, our work is for today, what it means to repent and to begin again.

Jesus began his journey in the wilderness seeking out spiritual knowledge through his cousin John the Baptizer. It wasn't long before he knew this was the path that he was to take, to join with this prophetic movement that was outside the traditional power structure of the Temple, that was inspired to call people back to the plan of God that was laid out in God's covenant with the people. Jesus stepped forward into this mission when he waded into the Jordan River to be baptized by John. As the waters of the river washed over him his spirit was awakened to the voice of God confirming his call to join that prophetic mission. Before he began his work though he had to hear of his own belovedness- his own blessedness in the eyes of God.

In early January of this year after we had finished hearing the stories of Christmas, the journey of the magi, we renewed our own baptismal vows and were reminded that our baptism is a life-long commitment, not only on God's part, but on our part – to remember our call, to remember

our blessedness, to remember our relationships with each other and with all of nature -.....

These lessons come back to us again as a new season of the Christian year begins. This is where it begins again – God has created you, God loves you and has created you for loving. The Spirit of life dwells within you to keep inspiring you to the end of your days; Jesus the Christ, son of man, the Human One, will teach you, seek you out when you lose your way, carry you when necessary, offer forgiveness, reveal miracles to you and feed you with bread and wine for the journey- giving you his own flesh and life blood. And from time to time He will say – Meet me in the wilderness.

Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, just when he may think he is ready to take on the world. It reminds me of when I offered myself to serve the church as a diaconal minister, and the Elders of the church I attended said they heard my call to ministry but said – ‘no, not just yet. You have to retreat from serving for a year, to learn more about the church, more about leadership, more about yourself’. At the time I was devastated but in the end, it was

a wise decision for looking back I was not spiritual prepared for the work I would be called to do. I had not gone deep enough into the heart of the church nor my own heart.

Mark is very sparse in his description of Jesus' time in the wilderness, trusting our own imaginations to flesh out what Jesus may have dreamed about in those 40 days, what stories of his faith comforted or challenged him, what prophetic voices spoke to him, what wild beasts accompanied him in the wilderness, what food he ate, what temptations gnawed at this flesh and churned in his heart and mind.

On Friday I heard from a voice from the wilderness – the voice of our old friend Brent who has been living the wilderness of the city streets of Montreal and Ottawa for about 14 years. Having found Christ in prison many years ago, he was interested in what the scripture was for Sunday. When I told him it was about Jesus in the wilderness, he said to make sure to talk to the people about the temptations. He has known the darker temptations with alcohol and drugs such as cocaine and prescription drugs, but he said to talk about the temptations to blame other people for your own

choices, for not taking responsibility for yourself. He grew up in a decent middle class home, yet he blamed his parents for creating a dysfunctional family, adopting 4 different children, some with problems like himself. It's taken him years to realize that he can't keep blaming them for his life choices, to name that as a far more difficult temptation to shake.

Lent is that season in which we are invited to meet God in the wilderness, to come to know our own temptations which destroy the abundant life we have been given. If depriving yourself of certain foods or adding in rituals or other practices during this 40 day season helps you in your inward journey, then by all means, plan what you will do.

Meet me in the wilderness –so the call of God comes to us as the church to listen for the way in which we can most richly serve our community, to discern what is the path to sustainability for our congregation, our church building, to learn what we need to let go of, what and who we need to embrace, to notice who is walking the way with us, to notice what is emerging as good news. I know at times it feels like

an urban wilderness as new condo buildings keep springing up, as the traffic makes our roads impassable, as roads and railways are carved underground, as we hear how our City's priorities are making the most vulnerable in our city to fend for themselves, as we imagine how our church can be used for many purposes, how we are called to be people of hospitality and warmth to strangers.

In the wilderness there is going to be fear, anger, temptations of all kinds to confront and give up.... Yet, this is also the place of gestation, of preparation, of creative chaos, for we remember how God's spirit hovered over the face of the deep darkness and breathed into the darkness light, the goodness of new life, possibilities, new adventures. So meet me in the wilderness and together we will seek the good news of God's reign.