

Matthew 4:1-11

“Leaning into the Wilderness”

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

Wilderness is an important biblical theme. Adam and Eve were sent from the garden of Eden into the wilderness when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We did not read that part of their story this morning. Abram and Sarai were called by God to leave their home land in Haran and journey into the wilderness. Jacob fled to the wilderness after he manipulated his brother out of his inheritance. Moses escaped to the wilderness after he was caught murdering an Egyptian soldier. The people of Israel spent forty year wandering in the wilderness after they escaped from slavery in Egypt and before they entered the Promised Land. Our sacred story is full of wilderness experiences. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jesus would spend some time in the wilderness.

In our sacred story wilderness is always a place of spiritual discovery. It is always a place where one encounters the Holy. It was in the wilderness that Moses encountered the burning bush and learned God's name; "I am who I am," or Yahweh. It was in the wilderness that Jacob discovered the entrance to heaven. Jacob declared after his dream about angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven; "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" Elijah and Jonah each had an encounter with God in the desert. In today's story, Jesus finds the strength to resist the challenges of the devil and the clarity he needs to begin his ministry during his sojourn in the wilderness. Immediately following his time in the wilderness, we read, "Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near."

The wilderness is not just a place of scarcity, of uncertainty, of testing and of wild animals. God is also found in the wilderness. Our passage comes to us today to invite us to follow Jesus into the

wilderness – to lean into wilderness and to be open to an encounter with the Holy.

For those of us who live in Northern Ontario the concept of wilderness conjures up a very different set of images than it did for the people of Israel and those first followers of Jesus. For them, wilderness was a desert. It was a place of extremes; cold nights and hot days. The wilderness was a place of scarcity. There was never enough food or water. It was a place where one could easily get lost because there were very few markers in the desert to show you the way. The desert was also a place filled with danger, like wild animals and unscrupulous people. It is also a place of isolation and loneliness.

As northerners, we do not see the wilderness as a desert. For most of us, the wilderness is a beautiful place; full of rivers, lakes and rocks. Many of us spend our summers at our camps on the edge of the wilderness. For us, the wilderness is a place of abundance rather than scarcity. The lakes are full of fish and our camps are overflowing with

happy family memories. From this perspective, it is easy to believe that God is present in the wilderness.

But, the wilderness that we know can also be for us a place where one can easily get lost, especially if we stray too far from the path. It can also be a place of danger. Like the desert, the wilderness that surrounds us is also full of wild animals and potential hazards. It can be fatal if you don't know what kind of mushrooms to eat or you are unaware of the dangerous rapids up ahead on the river you are canoeing. The point of our sacred story is that no matter how we picture wilderness it is an important part of our ongoing journey of faith and God can be found there. Wilderness is a metaphor of a place of danger, of uncertainty, of scarcity, of isolation and loneliness.

As we begin our journey into the season of Lent our sacred story invites us to embrace the wilderness. No matter how hard we try, we cannot escape the wilderness. The key is learning to lean into the

wilderness and discover where God is – to find the well hidden somewhere in the desert of our lives.

I think of my mother. Her hip is mending and she is gradually learning to become more mobile. But, she has just sold her home and she is now in between addresses. She is uncertain where the next stage of her journey will be lived. Her children have invited her, or forced her (depending on who you ask), to move to Thunder Bay. She has also given up her car which was an important source of pride and independence. Now someone must take her wherever she wants to go. Thus, she finds herself in a wilderness. I imagine there are a few of you gathered here today who know exactly what my mom is going through. You have made the same journey to the same wilderness. I pray that my mother will find the well that is hidden in her desert.

I have no idea what your wilderness looks like, but very few of us make it through this life without a few side trips into the wilderness. My prayer is that we might learn how to gently lean into our wilderness

and be open to meeting the holy there. I pray that we might each discover the well that is hidden in our desert. Let us commit ourselves during this season of Lent not to be afraid of the wilderness. Let us open ourselves up to a fresh encounter with the Holy as we lean into our wilderness. **Amen.**