

“Our Need for Wilderness”

Introduction: Last week, on Pentecost Sunday, we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit and our need for his convicting, comforting, empowering, and illuminating presence in our lives. In particular, as we heard both the Jewish leadership, and the followers of Jesus, grumbling about how hard it was to understand and accept what Jesus had to say about being the bread of life that comes down from heaven, we heard Jesus point to our need for the Spirit who gives life (Jn. 6:63), the Spirit who illuminates all that God has done and become for us in Jesus.

I also mentioned again that in this section of John’s gospel, he is showing us how Jesus attended the various Jewish feasts and drew themes from them to reveal more about who he is. The feast of Passover, which is behind John 6, and the feast of Tabernacles, which is behind John 7-8, both have the wilderness as a theme from which Jesus draws. So before moving on to chapters 7-8, we want to do what Jesus instructed his disciples to do in chapter 6 after his miraculous feeding—pick up the leftover pieces so that nothing would be wasted—and pick up this piece that is the wilderness and chew on it a bit. What we will see is that if we are to experience God as bread of life (Jn. 6), living water (Jn. 7), and light of the world (Jn. 8) – the One who sustains us, refreshes us, and guides us – we just might have to spend some time in the wilderness.

Three broad questions emerge for us to consider: First, what is the wilderness—what does it look like? Second, how do we end up there? Third, what does God want us to find there?

I. What is the wilderness?

A. Dictionary.com defines wilderness as “a wild and uncultivated region . . . uninhabited or inhabited only by wild animals; a tract of wasteland.” Deuteronomy adds that it is a vast and dreadful place, waterless and filled with venomous snakes and scorpions (8:15). Certainly,, the wilderness is a physical, geographical place. It is the place the Israelites needed to cross on their journey from their rescue from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. But it is also a physical picture of a deeper, spiritual dynamic. And that is that the wilderness is primarily a situation in which we have come to the end of ourselves and our resources, and need to trust in God.

B As God, through Jeremiah puts it, there are essentially only two types of people:

“...those who put their trust in mere humans and turn their hearts away from the LORD, [or] those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence.”

As these two types are described more fully, the former will not experience the life that is truly life because they are like “stunted shrubs in the desert.” The latter, however, will be like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water.” They will bear fruit even in times of drought (17:5-8, NLT).

C. So the wilderness becomes a place in which we are moved to ask: In whom are we trusting? In what are we rooted? Here’s how Moses described this time to the Israelites (8:2-3):

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart . . . He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

The wilderness, in other words, is a place of testing and teaching because it is a place where we have come to the end of ourselves and our resources and need to put our hope and confidence in God, who wants to satisfy us with the bread of life, refresh us with living water, and guide us with the light of the world. How, then, do we end up in this wilderness?

## II. How do we end up there?

A. Frankly, sometimes we find ourselves there through bad choices that we make. Just open up any daily paper or click on your daily newsfeed, or even just look back on your life! When we try to solve problems with force or violence, when we acquire things that cause our debt level to soar, when we take a job that requires large chunks of time away from our family, when we enter a relationship that can in no way be healthy, when we pursue what feels good rather than what is right, we can easily find ourselves in a kind of wilderness. In general, it's because we've chosen to trust in ourselves, and our own will, rather than in God and his will.

B. Conversely, we can also find ourselves in a kind of wilderness when things seem to be going well. We can be a great success according to norms of social media or our employer. We can possess great wealth and health and long life and education and the joys of marriage and children and friends but still not have any real sense of the meaning or purpose of our life, who we are or why we're here. One day we wake up and find ourselves in the wilderness, having trusted in what we do, what we have, or what others think of us, and somehow it all just falls flat.

God, through Moses, actually warns the Israelites that something like this could happen, even after forty years of training! Again, as they stand on the brink of the Promised Land, he says:

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God . . . when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud (lit. "lifted up") and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. [8:10-14]

It's so easy to lift our hearts, not to God but to our own pursuits, accomplishments, and successes. But it will catch up to us, Moses warns, and one day we may find ourselves back in the wilderness.

C. Finally, we can also find ourselves in the wilderness because God, in his wisdom, has chosen to lead us there. I don't know if it helps, but the wilderness is actually God's idea! He seems to lead his people there again and again for testing and teaching, probably because it is there that he finally has our attention. Three quick biblical examples come to mind.

1. Jesus, after he received the gift of the Holy Spirit upon his baptism in the Jordan River, was led into the wilderness to be tested. And do you remember who led him there? It was the Holy Spirit himself (4:1)! Even Jesus needed both the Spirit, and the wilderness, to become prepared for the Father's call upon his life. As he was being groomed to be Redeemer and Ruler of the universe, an appointment that would require him to go through the cross, he had to learn to trust his Father's will. Would he trust in and rely upon his own resources, his own ability to make bread out of stones, or upon the word and will of his Father? Would he seek his security, his meaning and purpose in material things, in fame and esteem, and in power and control, or through trusting in the Father's care and provision? The wilderness was the place to find out.

2. David, the greatest of Israel's kings before Jesus came on the scene, faced similar questions. Anointed king as a teenage boy by the prophet Samuel, and, interestingly, having just been filled with the Spirit, David immediately defeated the giant Goliath in a magnificent display of faith (1 Sam. 16-17). But then where do we find him? On the throne in Jerusalem? No, we find him out in the wilderness, being chased around by the mad king Saul who wanted to eliminate David from the scene. Even when it was within his power to get revenge, to quickly and easily put Saul to death, David did not. Instead, he poured out his heart to God, putting his trust in God and letting God prepare and bring him to the throne in God's timing and God's way.

3. And then there's Zechariah, the priest who became the father of John the Baptist, the one who would be instrumental in preparing God's people for the coming of the Messiah. Zechariah, when told by the angel that God was going to answer Zechariah's prayer and bring about hope for his people by bringing a child out of the wilderness that was the barren womb of his wife Elizabeth, didn't trust that word. So, God put him into what we might call the wilderness of wordlessness. He was unable to speak, the thing that gave him identity as a priest, until the child was born so that he might learn to trust in every word that came from the mouth of the LORD (Luke 1:18-22).

### III. What does God want us to find there?

A. So, once we find ourselves in the wilderness, what does God want us to find there? First, he wants us to find him! One of the significant aspects of the wilderness is that it is not a place God avoids, or from which he is absent. God does not reject us or condemn us for being there, nor does he turn up his nose from the messes we've created, but in an amazing and unexpected intervention, he meets us there. We have no evidence that the Spirit left Jesus after leading him to the wilderness. And Psalm 139 indicates that the Spirit is with us, even in the dark and wilderness places of our lives. In great humility and compassion, God, in Jesus, through the Spirit, has entered our lives, has entered the mess, has entered the wilderness and invites us to meet him there.

B. Then, once we have met him there, God wants us to rest in and trust in his love and provision. Moses put it this way for the Israelites: "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you" (8:10). In other words, recognize, respond to, and rest in this love and identity that God has for you. We are, as Ignatius once put it, "loved sinners." If we sink our roots in that identity, "loved sinner," instead of the many others we could choose, such as those based on our gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, nationality, job title, or role in our family, we will find ultimate satisfaction.

Jesus went into the wilderness confident of the Father's deep and personal love for him and identity as his Son. It was a love he had known since childhood and was affirmed at his baptism in the Jordan: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (Ma. 3:17). David went into the wilderness centered in his identity as God's anointed king (1 Sam. 16:12-13). If we live with the love and identity that God has for us at our center, if we live a life that flows out of the transfusion of God's Spirit filling our spirit, if we live a life that looks back regularly at what God has done and praise him for it, our hearts will be lifted up toward the right thing, toward God himself. We will be protected from the temptation to live on our own resources and will be sustained, instead, by the bread of life, refreshed by the living water, and guided by the light of the world.