

“Walking in the Wilderness”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

March 13, 2022 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Scripture Texts: *Isaiah 40:3-11*

³ A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was so happy when the Session made the decision to re-open the sanctuary and when the province lifted restrictions so that we can gather with fewer protocols in place. I was really looking forward to our first Sunday back in the sanctuary. We would sing (as long as we’re masked), we would celebrate the sacrament in person, and we would begin the journey toward the cross and the empty tomb together. We would be so happy to be together again (and it sounds like you were so I wasn’t wrong)! However, the joy fell off a bit with the appearance of Covid in my household forcing us all to isolate, meaning the postponement of my return to worship in the sanctuary. I am very grateful to my friend Ted for stepping in to lead worship and preside over the Sacrament in the sanctuary, and the grace with which he said he would help. He was also placed on a path he didn’t expect to walk last week. I must admit, even with knowing you were with some of the best worship leadership I know, I felt rather cheated out of being with my congregation on that first Sunday back together.

This year is different – again. The elements of the Lord’s Table last week were packaged individually rather than served by the community. Maundy Thursday will be a challenge to provide Communion. Lenten practices are different again. John and I are seeking creativity to help make the season meaningful for everyone. As I look forward, I realize my own journey through Lent began with some bumps right at the start. I had planned to introduce a series of Lenten services this year that began from a different place – with John the Baptist who usually kicks off the season of Advent for us. It was all somewhat disheartening. Then I read the first devotion in the Lenten series, and was caught by a line toward the end of the reflection: *So, we will walk with Jesus this Lent, keeping in mind that faith was never meant to be a destination, but*

a journey — a never-ending, creating and recreating, dying to the old and rising to the new, walk with Christ. My grumpiness about things not going as planned came to an abrupt halt as I realized I'm already on the never-ending, creating and recreating, dying to the old and rising to the new, walk with Christ. The path isn't my own, it's the one I am called to follow.

Because we are beginning this season as we emerge from the isolation and restriction of the pandemic, we take these first steps together with hope. Lent is a journey toward the source of our hope – the events of Holy Week, Good Friday, and the resurrected Christ, and no matter how we get there, that is the destination we must keep in mind.

So let me take this moment to introduce the worship series we are going to follow for the next few weeks. It comes from a devotion series produced by the national magazine of the Presbyterian Church USA – the Presbyterian Outlook. It reflects on a poem written by a Spanish poet as he thinks about the journey as a walk along a path that isn't in front of us – not as we normally recognize it. I plan to share these devotions with you each Sunday, reflecting on how it speaks to me, to this congregation, and to our new normal that is a post-pandemic world. I realize the pandemic isn't actually over, and the virus is going to disappear anytime soon, so we must adapt to a new way of living and worshipping. As we keep hearing, we must learn to live with it. Let me read the poem, followed by this Sunday's reflection in the devotion series. The devotional writer is the Rev. Teri McDowell Ott and she is the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook magazine.

Walker - Antonio Machado¹

Walker, your footsteps
are the road, and nothing more.

Walker, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.

Walking you make the road,
and turning to look behind
you see the path you never
again will step upon.

Walker, there is no road,
only foam trails on the sea.

“The wilderness is a place every Christian knows. It's not a physical place like the dry, desolate desert where we imagine the Spirit leading Jesus. Our wilderness creeps into our everyday lives, taking up residence in our mind, our mood, our soul. The wilderness is a spiritually dry space, devoid of inspiration. It takes all our effort to survive and thrive in the wilderness where we are tempted to stray from Christ's path at every turn.

“Maybe the wilderness crept into your life during our long period of pandemic isolation. Maybe you attended worship with your community via video or Zoom at first but grew

¹ Antonio Machado, trans. Willis Barnstone from *Antonio Machado, Border of a Dream: Selected Poems*, Copper Canyon Press, 2004

dissatisfied with all things virtual. It was easy to ignore your church's worship, to power down your community's connection.

“So much has been revealed through this pandemic. We learned more about each other than perhaps we ever wanted or was good for us to know. The behavior of some in my community has angered and irritated me. Stones have been thrown in every direction. We've witnessed and been tempted by greed, self-righteousness, and a flagrant disregard for neighbour and stranger. An evil disease has wreaked havoc on our lives — disorienting, tempting, and corrupting.

“This Lent is our chance to spiritually reboot. As we make this road with Jesus, we follow the One who was tempted as we are tempted. Jesus willingly followed the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by power, greed and glory. Jesus knows where we are and he knows the way out. This is the good news. We don't have to make this road alone. We have an experienced spiritual guide. Jesus made it through. With his help, we can too.”²

The wilderness can be a frightening, disorienting place. When we can't see the way out no matter which direction we look, it can prompt panic and despair. Many years ago I attended a Red Wings game in Detroit with family friends. The Leafs were in town that night and I think my companions were the only people in the building cheering for them (I was a Wings fan). The arena was loud and filled with high energy. Growing up with a sports broadcaster Dad, I was used to being in loud arenas. I had seen my share of live professional hockey, baseball, and basketball. I knew what to expect. But I always had my Dad to guide me through the crowd of people. I could keep my eyes on him when I was surrounded by the crowd and couldn't see the way out. This time was different. This time my Dad wasn't there. I was with people I knew and trusted, but didn't know their routines at this kind of event. So I ended up clinging to the sleeve of one of my friends and hanging on as if my life depended on it, hoping I could keep up and wouldn't get separated (and that they wouldn't be recognized as Leaf fans in the Detroit crowd!). I was terribly anxious until we emerged from the building and made our way back to the car to go home. I'm not sure what I would have done had I become separated from them. I probably would have panicked.

A hockey crowd can hardly be compared to what Jesus experienced as he was tempted in the wilderness, but the vastness of the desert combined with the devil's cunning temptations would not have been a fun experience. Jesus knew he had to stay the course and lean on God's strength to make it through. The Spirit had led him into the wilderness for this testing, would it lead him through the testing itself? John had echoed the prophet's call for a path to be laid for the Promised One's arrival, but the Spirit had led Jesus to a different place. And yet, that way was prepared for the Lord. It, quite simply, wasn't the easy path one might have expected from the prophet and the evangelist's call. The road may have been smooth. The journey was not.

As the devotional writer says, it's easy to become lost when we are in the wilderness. It's easy for us to be lead in a direction other than where we are supposed to go. It's easy to become

² “Making the Road” A Lenten series of devotions written by the Rev. Teri-McDowell Ott, Editor of Presbyterian Outlook magazine, Presbyterian Church USA, 2022. This reading is the devotion for March 13, 2022.

disoriented, tempted, and corrupted, and to lose sight of the one we are meant to follow as we walk the path. Isaiah and John call out for a path to be made in the wilderness, for rough ways to be made smooth, for obstacles to be removed, for the crooked to be made straight and for the road to be levelled out where it is uneven. How can we do that when we are struggling along the path?

We do that by allowing the Holy Spirit to shape, lead, and transform us so we can handle the path. The Holy Spirit creates a path within us for the Lord to enter into our hearts and lives and live through us. The building of a road isn't an easy or quick task. It takes effort, the right equipment, and someone to oversee the tasks each worker is given so that the road is built to its best quality. The building of our relationship with Christ takes a lifetime of study, prayer and worship, and the Holy Spirit oversees the work being done in us as we are made into the people God intends for us to be. The Holy Spirit oversees and perfects the work that is done as we walk the path of faith toward the destination of being made into Christ-like people.

Which leads me to the second part of what we will be doing throughout this season of Lent.

St. Andrew's Hall at Vancouver School of Theology is one of our Canadian Presbyterian Seminaries. The Hall has produced a Lenten Devotion Guide, and each day provides a reading written by someone in the St. Andrew's Hall community. Each Sunday, as we reflect together on the devotions that forge a new kind of path through Lent, we will also share these insightful readings, written from a perspective of learning and the development of missional faith. Where the devotions from Teri McDowell Ott begin with the Scriptural foundation that normally kicks off the season of Advent, the St. Andrew's Hall reflections remind us of the foundational stories upon which the church has traditionally walked in the season of Lent. The different approaches and views come together in Christ, who is the destination toward whom we make this faithful journey. This Sunday's reading is written by the Chaplain at St. Andrew's Hall as she reflects on the event of Jesus' transfiguration.

"These winter months have been difficult for us, especially because of the pandemic. We long for change, for transformation. We see transformation in nature when the sap flows through leafless branches, providing nourishment until they become leafy branches again, where birds can sit and happily chirp.

"We see transformation in scripture when Peter -- one of the three who accompanied Jesus up the mountain to pray -- changed from someone who had denied Jesus and abandoned him, into being a key leader of the Early Church.

"The process of transformation can happen when you open yourself, just as you are, to encounter Jesus in a deeper way.

"On the mountain, the disciples overheard Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah about his departure -- his death, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus helped the disciples realize who he is as true God and true human, so their hearts could begin to change.

"In Jesus' transfiguration, Luke points us to the cross and to the most powerful way God has transformed the world.

“The cross was a horrible instrument of death, yet it too was transformed because, when Jesus died and rose from the dead, God broke the power of sin to destroy us.

“God took the worst that this world could do to a person and overcame it so that in Christ we might be changed, and so live life with purpose and joy, trusting in the goodness of God.”

We are seeing a lot of awful things the world is doing to people.

The war in Ukraine.

The Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan.

Civil war in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Myanmar.

Israel and Palestine.

As so many have said, take a look at what is happening in these places around the world and whether or not we’re wearing masks doesn’t seem like such a big deal.

It is hard to be in the wilderness, no matter what kind of wilderness in which we find ourselves. It can creep in and disorient us. The Holy Spirit is there to lead us to a safer place and a better path, but we have to trust God enough to keep our eyes on the Spirit and be led. That’s hard. And it’s transformational. It’s about walking in the wilderness and emerging in the glory of God’s salvation. The wilderness can be a scary place. Remember God is present there, ready to lead us on the right path to make it through. Amen.