

Entering The Wilderness

Matthew 3:13-4:11

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I wonder if you remember a children's book by Maurice Sendak entitled "Where The Wild Things Are"? Published in 1963, it has been a favorite of at least two generations of children and parents. The story is about a young boy named Max who is wreaking havoc in his home as he runs around wearing a wolf costume. Ultimately, his frustrated mother gets so overwhelmed that she says, "Wild Thing!"

"I'll eat you up!" Max responds and his mother sends him to his room without eating anything.

What happens next is a deep dive into Max's imagination. Mysteriously, wild plants and trees grow up in his room until he seems to be deep in the jungle. Then a boat appears which carries Max across the sea to where the Wild Things are. The Wild Things roar their terrifying roar and gnash their terrifying teeth, but Max stands up to them and stares directly into their eyes to intimidate them. They decide that Max is the wildest thing of them all and make him their king. Together they romp and play until Max sends the beasts to bed without supper. As delicious smells drift toward him from far away, he begins to feel lonely, wanting someone who cares just for him. So he sails back across the sea to his room and discovers his supper waiting for him on a table and still hot.

When interviewed, Sendak described *Where the Wild Things Are*, along with his other books *In the Night Kitchen* and *Outside Over There*, as a sort of trilogy centered on children's growth, survival, change, and fury; all three books are "variations on the same theme: how children master various feelings – danger, boredom, fear, frustration, jealousy – and manage to come to grips with the realities of their lives."

Of course, a huge part of the appeal of the book for adults and children is that we all have those places where the wild things are. Places within ourselves where our deepest and most frightening or tempting feelings, needs, wants and worries reside. Many of us may spend a lifetime trying to avoid that place but find we are healthier and happier when we meet the wild things willingly.

In scripture, the wilderness is often where the wild things are. Stories of the wilderness run throughout the Bible - it is the vastness out of which God created life, the world outside the gate of the Garden of Eden, the barren land where the Israelites wandered for forty years, the place to which Hagar and Ishmael retreated after being sent away by Abraham and Sarah and, of course, the place where the Spirit leads Jesus for forty days of fasting and temptation.

Every year, we begin Lent with the story of Jesus in the wilderness because Lent is the time when we intentionally invite the Spirit to guide us into the wilderness as well. For the forty days leading up to Easter, not including Sundays, Christians around the world look deep into their hearts to examine themselves, their lives, and their faith. We choose to use this time to look at

what might be standing between us and a whole and life-giving relationship with God and to remove those barriers so we arrive at Easter restored and renewed.

So what is the wilderness for you this year? What feelings of hurt, fear, worry, anger, or guilt have you pushed deep down inside where they may be growing thick and dense like the jungle in Max's room - a jungle of unresolved emotion that stands between you and God? For many of us this whole year has felt like a wilderness. The steady increase of depression and anxiety among Americans only lays bare the emotional chaos many of us are experiencing. We feel weary, frustrated, afraid, sad, or helpless. Yet, your personal experience of the wilderness may have its roots in something else entirely - a death or divorce, illness or lost job, broken relationship or great loneliness. Whatever leads us to wander in the wilderness, almost always leads us to question our faith, as well. Where is God? Is there a God? How could God let this happen? These are the kinds of questions we will explore on this six-week journey to Easter.

Interestingly, in Jesus and his time in the wilderness, we find an example of how all this questioning, struggling, and truth-telling can ultimately lead us to a closer relationship with God. So, before we go any further, let's take a look at what we can learn from Jesus in the wilderness, but let's start with what happens just before. As we heard from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus comes to the river Jordan where John is baptizing people and asks John to baptize him. At first John is resistant, saying Jesus should be the one doing the baptizing, but ultimately he agrees. When Jesus comes up from the water, the Spirit descends from the heavens in the form of a dove and lands on him, and we hear a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Only after God affirms Jesus and declares his love for him does the Spirit lead him into the wilderness.

As we embark on this wilderness journey together, we, too, can center ourselves in the knowledge of God's love for us. Each of us is God's beloved. Each of us can feel the assurance of God walking with us - no matter what fear or anger or doubt or guilt we may encounter. Our identities are rooted in Christ - in the choice we make to follow Christ - and our courage for the journey is rooted in the assurance of God's absolute love and abundant grace. God is present in the wilderness with us.

When Jesus arrives in the wilderness, he begins a period of fasting - forty days without food - at the end of which the devil comes to him, goading him and testing him. The devil wants Jesus to prove that he is the Son of God so he tempts Jesus with what he needs most. "You're hungry so turn these stones into bread." Then he suggests Jesus prove himself by throwing himself off a cliff. He plays to Jesus' ego, saying if he is God's son, then surely angels will come and save him. Finally, he tempts Jesus with power, offering Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus will only worship him.

With each of these temptations, the devil appeals to some basic human hunger - for food, for acclaim, for power. Yet, each time Jesus responds by turning to scripture. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." and "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." While the devil hopes to use food, vanity, or greed as ways to pull Jesus away from God, what happens is that these temptations actually help him to strengthen and shape his identity as God's son.

Commentator Slats Toole puts it this way. “Despite physical weakness, Jesus finds spiritual strength to hold fast to God. As the distractions of the world fade away, the things that are truly important come into focus, and the devil’s diverting words lose all power. Perhaps one of the gifts of the angels that dwell in this wilderness is the opportunity to discover how courageous, how steady, and how faithful we have the ability to be.”

As it was with Jesus, the time we spend in the wilderness can actually strengthen and hone our relationship to God. Confronting our difficult emotions, acknowledging our doubts and questions of faith, brings down those barriers between us and God, teaching us again to embrace the abundant and joy-filled life God has created for us.

In her essay entitled “Into the wild”, author Debi Thomas writes, “Maybe we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God’s beloved. Because the unnerving fact is: we can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be beloved and unsafe at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft. Salvific, not sentimental.”

And so, as we enter the wilderness on this first weekend in Lent- as we embark on this journey of self-examination and honest reflection - I invite you to sit down with a journal or in a time of prayer and ask yourself a few questions. First, “What experiences this year have left me feeling as though I am in the wilderness?” And then, “What emotions have I struggled with or simply buried so I could ignore them during this time?” “How do those experiences and emotions create barriers between me and God?” And finally, “What does it mean to be God’s beloved as I work to bring down those barriers?”

Next week, we’ll explore the story of Nicodemus and the wilderness as a place of doubting God.

Until then, may you find the courage to put on your wolf suit, jump on a boat, and sail to where the wild things are.

May it be so. Amen.