

A Way in the Wilderness

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 2, 2022. On this Ash Wednesday, Pastor Meagan preaches on our reading from the prophet Joel: “The day of the Lord is coming, it is near.” Many passages in scripture about the wilderness can feel discomfoting or uninviting, and the wildernesses of our time can feel vast, overwhelming, and unconquerable. But God is no stranger to the wilderness, and so we begin our journey into the wilderness these next 40 days knowing that God will be with us every step.

Readings: [Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#), [Isaiah 43:19](#)

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We start with these words from tonight's reading from the prophet Joel: “The day of the Lord is coming, it is near.” What are the first images you think of? The first images that come to my mind are justice. Life. Abundance. Healing. Reconciliation. Tears being wiped from our eyes, all hunger being satisfied. All the promises of God being fulfilled in the blink of an eye. All promises we hear throughout the scriptures.

But the prophet Joel tonight describes the day of the Lord a little differently: “A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been seen from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.” Gloom, clouds, an army coming that covers the mountains? Especially today. Really, God, how am I supposed to look forward to that?

Many of the passages in scripture about the wilderness can feel just as discomfoting or uninviting. Jesus being driven into the desert for 40 days. The Israelites, wandering for 40 years. Hagar and her infant Ishmael, in the wilderness and at the point of death before returning to Sarah, who abused Hagar while Abraham looked the other way.

I'm dating myself here, but I was in college when the United States and other allied nations attacked Iraq in the early '90s. Iraq had invaded Kuwait and annexed part of their land, and the allied nations moved in to support and free the annexed territories. It was the first time in my awareness that we had been able to watch a war unfold on live television. Every channel covered it (there were only about five) and I felt completely consumed, overwhelmed, and lost in the horror that was taking place on the other side of the ocean. And I wondered at the time, if that's how I feel just watching it on television, what is it like for the people of Iraq and Kuwait, hearing the bombs go off, fearing for their own lives and the lives of their loved ones, with no safe refuge to turn to?

As we worship tonight, some 30 years later, we humans still haven't figured things out, and are still lost in seemingly the same old wilderness. Once again, the world watches as one nation — this time Russia — attacks and annexes another — this time Ukraine — and allied nations one more time try to figure a way out.

The wildernesses of our time and our lives can feel vast, overwhelming, and unconquerable, filled with Joel's gloom, as we face powers as imposing as Joel's armies. In our own lives, the wildernesses of addiction, loss and grief, physical and mental illnesses. The wilderness of struggles in employment, in relationships, and unexpected crossroads. In our world, the wilderness of a third year of COVID, climate change, poverty, political upheaval, and injustices. The wilderness of the horrific injustice

being done to the Ukrainian people as we watch.

The wilderness of knowing that in the midst of it all, we ourselves have failed to be the people God created us to be. That like all of God's people that have gone before us from the Israelites until now, we all have, as Luther said, sinned and fallen short, and we may at times feel as broken as the world around us. We're left wondering sometimes where God might be and what God might be up to, because we can't see it. And here we are, this Ash Wednesday evening, hearing Joel's description of the day of the Lord, and I think to myself how long, O God, will we be left in this wilderness that we are wandering in?

When the Worship team met to reflect on where we felt God might be leading us this Lent, we were all feeling the vastness of the wilderness of this world that we're living in. Isaiah 43:19, which we'll hear in a few Sundays, began to resonate for each of us in profound ways. It also speaks to wilderness, but with a different perspective. "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." New thing. Springing forth. Rivers in the dryness of the desert. God making a way in the wilderness.

We find in the scriptures that God is no stranger to the wilderness. Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael followed God through the wilderness to an unknown land that God showed them. Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness of the desert, as God led them out of captivity and to the Promised Land. Isaiah speaks those words of invitation and promise to people who have been living in the wilderness of exile for almost 50 years and are finding their way finally into community once again. In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist calls himself "the voice of one crying out in the desert, preparing the way of the Lord." And no sooner has John baptized Jesus than the Spirit leads Jesus himself into the wilderness of the desert for 40 days. God is no stranger to the wilderness.

Lent is indeed a season of reflection on wilderness — the places of brokenness and sin, lostness in our lives and in our world, and the profound need for God's love and mercy. We mark ourselves with ashes tonight to remind ourselves of this. This Lent especially, it is also a time to remember that the God who formed and shaped us out of dust, and breathed life into us, never abandons us, no matter how lost and broken we may be.

God is no stranger to the wilderness. And so together, we journey into the wilderness these 40 days, knowing that God is with us every step. We name the brokenness, and we perceive the new things that God is bringing to life, springing forth where it seemed that there was only death. We follow the rivers of the Spirit in the dry places in our lives, knowing that God is making a way in our wilderness, where we least expect it.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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