

“Into the Wilderness”
A homily by Stephen Martz for the people of
St. Nicholas with the Holy Innocents
11 March 2007
The Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 3:1-15 + Psalm 63 + 1 Corinthians 10 :1-13 +
Luke 13:1-9

We hear this morning that Moses *led his flock beyond the wilderness*. And we know that the wilderness is a rich and varied image in the Hebrews Scriptures.

It can be a place of danger and death. We probably all remember the complaint of the Israelites as Moses led them through the wilderness: *If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.* (Exodus 16:3)

The wilderness can also be a place of rebellion and punishment. Again during the exodus we recall not just the complaints of the people, but their faithlessness and rebellion against God, who finally lost it: *But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.* (Numbers 14:32-33)

Besides a place of danger and death, rebellion and punishment, the wilderness can be a place of evil and temptation. Just think of the scapegoat, who is loaded with the transgressions of the people and sent away: *The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.* (Leviticus 16:22)

More positively, wilderness can be a sanctuary and place of guidance. Elijah flees from Jezebel to it. Reuben saves Joseph's life by placing him in a pit in the wilderness. And David escapes there to safety in his flight from Saul.

Most importantly, as we see in today's reading from the book of Exodus, the wilderness is the place of covenant and theophany, the place where God reveals himself to Moses.

I was struck by the phrase, *beyond the wilderness*, and so I checked three other translations. All were different. The Revised English Bible says Moses goes to the *west side of the wilderness*, while the New American has him travel *across the desert*, and the New Jerusalem favors *the far side of the desert*.

These differences suggest it is difficult to characterize the place where Moses goes, but taken together these translations clearly place him at the extreme edge of the wilderness. Hear that both geographically and spiritually.

In tending their flocks shepherds occupy a unique position in their society, regularly moving between wilderness – where they encounter God in all God's holy shock and awe -- and settled areas, where they then interpret the divine to those who have not gone deep into the wilderness. We see vestiges of this tradition in Moses' encounters with God which he then brings to the people.

What makes this important is not that it is an ancient pattern, but that this ancient pattern remains alive in us. For where do we go to encounter God? The first answer most of us will give is: church. And I agree.

But the problem with the God of the church is that we have domesticated the dickens out of God, frillying up the divine and ignoring the fullness of God. Do any of you remember the wonderful passage from the writer Annie Dillard that preachers, myself included, were so fond of quoting a few years back? She said,

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. Teaching a Stone to Talk

So where do we encounter God? I am sure our most profound encounters occur in the wilderness of our lives. Like all things postmodern, we can't locate the wilderness in a single geographic place. It is more a spiritual reality and it will differ for each of us. But I can think of several wild places that many, if not all of us will find familiar.

There is the wilderness of addiction, be that addiction alcohol, drugs, food, or something else. Those who have walked through this desert know how hopeless a place it can seem, while we do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result.

Until we hit bottom. For many this is a hard, hard hit, with lost jobs, lost relationships, lost opportunity. Yet in the hit, when we are lucky, we bounce up against something greater than us – what AA members call a Higher Power, what Episcopalians call God. And it is in that encounter that life can begin to change.

There is also the wilderness of pain or illness, of grief and loss. Several among us are traveling in this wilderness right now. Marge and Carmen with cancer. Betty Jo and Rob following the recent death of Rob's father. Charles and Tracy, following his mother's stroke. And there are others. It is often a frightening, agonizing place to be, this wilderness.

Unless grace touches us and assures us that all is well, all will be well, we likely will be as terrified, faith-challenged, and ungrateful as the Israelites in their wilderness.

I recall many years ago how dismembered I felt at the sudden tragic death of a close friend and, although I can well up even today when thinking about her death, I also remember what a difference it made when I had a dream in which she was alive and we were walking together hand in hand through a field.

Finally, for this homily at least, there is the wilderness that comes when we transgress a moral or collective boundary. Sometimes this arises when we make a mistake and do something wrong.

I've talked in the past about the tragedy that occurred around the corner from our house 15 years ago. An impatient young driver whipped around a school bus that he thought was making a left turn but that was discharging its passengers. Sadly, he struck and killed a 15 year old boy.

Other times, we find ourselves in this wilderness when we know something is right for us and is an expression of our soul, even though others don't understand it, frown upon it, or even condemn what we know we must do. It takes courage to follow the path of the soul. Just ask Jesus.

Or ask the person next to you. Many in this church have had to struggle hard to walk the path of the soul. For some, the issue has been spiritual. Could they follow a faith different than the faith of their fathers – and mothers? Many here have disappointed Roman Catholic parents when they have left the church of their childhood and had to say to mom and dad, *Sorry, but now we are Episcopalians.*

Others in our church have had to face a sexual issue and find the courage – and it still takes courage, even today – to live forthrightly as a gay man or lesbian.

And for still others, the struggle is neither spiritual or sexual; it often is vocational. Can I stay in this career that pays me so well but doesn't nourish any organ of my soul, or must I leave and do something new with my life?

In these wildernesses, these desert places, we wrestle with our actions and their consequences, come to grips with our brokenness and our wholeness -- and of course crash up against God, often again and again.

So let us remember today that Moses' journey is our journey. What started out for him as just another day tending the flock, the equivalent of another day at the office for us, became something much more.

Was it because he wandered *beyond the wilderness*? I like to think it was, and that unconsciously he was led to go there, to that remote place in his geography, in his spirituality.

Once there, he found mystery. The bush burned, but was not consumed. And he attended to it, pondered the meaning of this mysterious occurrence. At first, he did not realize God was there.

Moses had not come to this place, consciously at least, looking for God. But God was there and revealed herself.

So may it be with us. If we don't find ourselves forced there, may we have the courage to journey into the spiritual wilderness, and the good fortune to come upon the mystery of God.

And, you know, maybe we could even go there in church, right now, as we begin our time of meditation. But if you decide to make that journey, be sure to put on your life preservers and crash helmets, for God, in Dillard's great phrase, *may draw us out to where we can never return*.