

## LED BY THE SPIRIT

TEXT: Proverbs 4:1-11

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 6, 2022*

There once was a time when the clouds on the great mountain got very full. They hung lower and lower until one day they could hold back no longer and rain began to fall from the clouds down onto the mountain peak. It began slowly, and each droplet of water found a place on the mountaintop, wondering what had happened. At first the droplets felt frightened and alone, but as the clouds began to rain more heavily, the droplets soon found they had company. Soon many droplets had come together to form a small stream, and they made their way down the mountainside.

The stream picked up speed on the way down, pushing stones and dirt along with it. Soon the stream began to find other streams. They joined together and became a river, and they discovered that together they were very powerful. Now they moved much bigger rocks as they rushed on their way, and when the rocks would not move, they carved their way through them, making deep canyons in places where the rocks had thought themselves invincible.

The river surged on in its mighty power down the mountain, through the canyon, and right up to the edge of the desert. But the river could not flow as quickly on the flat ground. Instead of moving rocks or making a canyon, all it could do was gently smooth out the rough edges. The river could see other mountains on the other side of the desert; and the river knew, if it could just get to the other side, it could go back to being powerful and could once again rush down the mountain, move boulders and carve canyons. So, the river set out to cross the desert.

The river found a little hill, and with all its might, it pushed down the hill to the edge of the desert sands. But it could not cross. Every time the water met the sand, it just sank in and disappeared. No matter how many times the river rushed down the hill and into the sand, it could not even begin to cross the desert. The desert just drank the river, and the faster the river came, the more the desert drank.

The river grew angry and then despondent. It looked across the desert and longed for the mountains on the other side, where it could again know power and freedom. At last, the river prayed to God. "God," said the river, "I must cross this desert and get to the mountains. This desert is drinking me so quickly that I will perish if I cannot get to the mountains." God answered the desert. "There is only one way to cross the desert. You must give yourself up to the desert wind and be carried by the desert itself to the mountains." "No!" said the river. "I will not give myself to the desert. The desert wants to destroy me." And the river threw itself all the harder at the desert sands. But the river could not even begin to cross, and the desert drank and drank and drank.

Finally, some of the droplets in the river gave up. "What does it matter?" they said. "If we keep rushing into the desert sands, we will die. Why not try trusting ourselves to the desert wind? If we die, that was our fate anyway, but if we don't, we might cross the desert as God has said. We have nothing to lose." And so, one brave droplet called for the desert wind. With a great burning rush, the wind whistled across the desert, blowing the sand as if it were nothing. It came and hovered over the river, and the river could feel the wind's hot breath.

The one droplet who had called looked into the fiery face of the wind. It shuddered for a moment, took one last look toward the mountains and then bowed its head. The other droplets watched, holding their

breath, as their companion vanished in a puff of steam and rose into the hot wind. Another droplet did the same and another and another, until the river itself did not have enough left to resist the heat of the breath.

The droplets were all quiet in the wind, too frightened to notice that they were not alone or that the wind was slowly carrying all of them across the desert. By the time the wind reached the mountains, it had grown heavy with its load. It labored up the side of the mountain. It was losing its fierce heat as it traveled farther from the hot sands. Finally, it lost its strength and could hold itself no longer. It began to rain. At first the droplets felt frightened and alone, but soon they found each other and joined together to form a stream. The stream began to flow down the mountain in search of other streams; and the wind, now free of its burden, whistled as it ran back to the desert.

It's tempting to end the sermon right there. This old folktale about the river, the wind, and the desert is the story of life. But when times are good, especially over long stretches of time, Christians can start to believe that such stories don't apply to us. Believe in Jesus and all our problems will vanish. Have enough faith and God will fix everything so that we don't have to contribute more than minimal effort. We rage against God or accuse each other of having no faith when life turns harsh. But nothing in Christian faith promises a desert-free life. In fact, the arc of Jesus' short and powerful time on earth teaches us the exact opposite. Significant time in the wilderness is a feature, not a bug of the faithful life.

The story I read from Matthew's gospel with the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness comes at the very start of Jesus' ministry, immediately following his baptism. How did Jesus end up in the Judean desert? Did the devil drag him there? No. Did sinful people push him there? No. Was God punishing him? No. Perhaps the oddest part of the whole story is the very first sentence. "Then Jesus was led **by the Spirit** into the desert to be tempted by the devil." Jesus did not end up in the wilderness with the devil as some cruel twist of fate. It was God who sent Jesus into the desert, knowing full well what awaited him there.

It was the same in the Exodus, which we'll be exploring more throughout the Lenten season. The Israelites leave Egypt and end up in the desert. The desert was not the quickest or the most direct route to Canaan from Egypt. It was, in fact, the long-way round. But Israel didn't end up there because Moses forgot his compass. Israel ended up in the desert because God, in the form of a cloud by day and a fiery pillar by night, led them there.

In both Exodus and Matthew, the desert experience is ordained by God; not for punishment, but for training. Further, they are not led there and then abandoned. God goes with the Israelites, just as we see angels coming to sustain Jesus. God is in the desert, but God doesn't follow us there, God leads us there. There we stay, with God's help, until God decides we are prepared to meet what lies ahead. And then God leads us out.

From from the witness of nature as we heard in the story to the witness of Scripture, it appears that the fierce disciplines of the wilderness are somehow necessary to our lives, usually multiple times. In our culture, we tend to think that anything that causes us pain or difficulty is bad, and whatever increases our comfort and happiness is good. We are so ingrained in that way of thinking that it becomes almost impossible to imagine God leading us into the desert without implying that either God is evil or that we have sinned.

Of course, there is plenty of suffering and hardship that **is** inflicted by evil; and we do bring a lot of suffering upon ourselves. We have been watching it unfold in the news daily—most dramatically in Ukraine and Russia, but also in the daily horrors of Black Americans slaughtered for just trying to live their lives, laws passed in various states to strip women and LGBTQ people of their rights, the assaults on education and the right to vote, the dehumanization of refugees and indigenous peoples, the total disregard for the planet we call home and the wanton extinction of the non-human beings who live here. The list itself is long enough to be a sermon, and the history of such evils, and our own complicity in

allowing them to continue, is as old as humanity itself. But that's a different sermon that springs from other stories.

The biblical metaphor of wilderness that fills the season of Lent is not about the suffering that comes from evil, injustice, or even our own sin coming back to haunt us. It's about the enormous challenge of liberating the world and ourselves from those things and the sacrifices we have to make if the realm of God is ever to come to earth as it is in heaven. It's about how the wild places of the earth and the unexplored wilderness of our own hearts teach us who we are and who God is and how that understanding forms us into a united and liberating force.

Another story making the same point is a scene from the Star Wars saga, as the Jedi Master Yoda is training aspiring Jedi Luke Skywalker in a swampy, jungle wilderness. Yoda sends Luke into an ominous-looking cave. "What's in there?" asks Luke. "Only what you take with you," says Yoda. Luke drops into the slime and dark of the cave; and Darth Vader emerges from the shadows. Lightsabers are drawn. Luke beheads Vader and the masked head drops to the ground. As Luke looks on, the mask dissolves to reveal Luke's own face. Every religious tradition, every hero's story, requires some form of that same courageous encounter where we learn who we are, what matters most, and what is required for us to do our part to heal and protect the world.

Notice how the devil tempts Jesus. Jesus has been led into the wilderness for difficult training. Fasting. Time alone to ask himself hard questions about his own strength, God's purpose, and what lies ahead. Notably, when the devil shows up, he is not trying to make Jesus suffer more. The devil is offering a way **out of** the suffering. Hungry? Make yourself some bread. Having a hard time convincing people to follow you? Give them a show—throw yourself off the temple—you know God will catch you. Want to help all those poor lost souls out there? You don't need to go to any cross or have any pain—just worship me, and I'll give you all of it. You don't need to take the hard road. There are perks and privileges available to the son of God. Use them, and I'll take care of the rest!

Most of the time, the offerings of the devil are offerings of ease and comfort, while the message of the Gospel is that of the Cross—the symbol of an agonizing death that is willingly endured for the sake of a greater good. It is suffering; but it is suffering that is chosen, not inflicted by others. Avoiding suffering is a way to save ourselves. Choosing sacrifice and pain; taking the hard and narrow road instead of the broad, wide path, is what it takes to save the world.

What would it mean for our Christian lives if we saw suffering as one of the marks of our faith? I don't mean having a martyr complex; I mean eliminating the prosperity complex. Nowhere in the Bible does God promise a rose garden. The whole thing begins, very pointedly, with the first man and the first woman getting kicked **out** of the garden—out of a perfect and pain-free life into thorns and labor pains and the sweat of Adam's brow. All the rest of the Bible is the long, hard slog from sin to wilderness to returning stronger; rinse and repeat over and over, until we are strong enough to usher in a new garden for the healing of the nations at the end of the book of Revelation.

In our baptismal vows, we promise to "resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." Look at those forms that surround us now. Look at what it's costing people to confront evil, injustice, and oppression right at this very moment. Can we possibly think that the training for that work will be or should be a cake walk? What would our military be like if we trained recruits in lawn chairs on tropical islands?

The witness of Scripture, both in the printed word and in the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, is that the people of God are formed, trained, and retrained in the desert. And the desert will drink us dry unless we give ourselves into the hands of the fiery Spirit who led us there and who stands ready to lead us through if we are willing to enter in faith.

One thing that's notable in both the folktale I told at the beginning and all the biblical stories of wilderness is that the wilderness is always preparation for a new thing that lies ahead. Once we enter the wilderness, there is no going back. We can cry and lie down at the edge, spending our lives grieving what we have lost, or we can trust God to lead us forward and train us to help heal the world. That is not to dismiss the trauma and magnitude of what we have lost or to minimize the difficulties ahead; it's merely honoring what we've lost by choosing life over death and helping to secure a better future.

The wilderness we are experiencing now, as we are assaulted by a pandemic, political attacks, increasing climate emergency, and now a quickly escalating war, is already changing us. There is no "normal" we'll be going back to. The only way is forward to something we don't yet fully know. But one of the gifts of wilderness is focus. If you don't pay attention in the wilderness; if you don't have a reliable guide, you're dead, and that becomes evident really quickly.

As our harsh circumstances focus our attention, we are better able to see that God didn't leave us as the desert's edge. God, in fact, leads us, even here. God sends angels to help hold us up, even here. When we commit to enter the wilderness, to take up our own cross, the assurance of Scripture is that God is here, leading us, feeding us, carrying us, and shaping us into a people equipped to meet this moment. The devil, meanwhile, would like to offer us an easier path. It's our choice. Amen.