

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
March 26, 2006

WILDERNESS EXAMS

We've just finished winter quarter and students have endured final exams this past week. Living in academia can be like living in a wilderness. It can be exciting, invigorating, misleading, lonely, or even a struggle to survive. This current liturgical season of Lent has something to say about living in a wilderness as well.

The spiritual landscape of Lent, the forty-day period that began on Ash Wednesday, March 1 and ends just prior to Holy Week on April 9, is a season of soul-searching, repentance, reflection and taking stock. Lent originated in the early days of Christianity as a preparatory time for Easter when the faithful rededicated themselves and by observing Lent, imitate Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days.

The gospel narratives of the Lenten season do not begin with angels and shepherds, but in the wilderness where Jesus, after his own baptism is sealed by the comforting words of God – *You are my beloved Son, with you I am well-pleased*. And is immediately, not eventually, driven out into the wilderness. In this case, the Lenten natural landscape is the desert – the Greek word for desert – *eremos* – means deserted, a place too extreme for human habitation. It is here where Jesus, the central character of this fierce, unsettling story that ushered us into Lent 25 days ago found himself utterly alone, susceptible to temptation, extraordinarily vulnerable.

Add to this Lenten context the striking images of serpents (who also inhabit deserts) from today's readings:

The Book of Numbers enumerates the story of God sending poisonous serpents to deliver fatal bites to the complaining Israelites (there is no food and the food is no good!) God's antidote is not soothing or comforting but a bronze image, fashioned by Moses, of the same serpent that brought the plague in the first place. The Israelites are compelled to gaze upon it in order to live. Yes, God brings healing, but in this case it is a healing tinged with terror. If that's not enough, John's gospel today compares Jesus to Moses serpent: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The death of Jesus is foreshadowed, but this is not the meek Lamb of God slain; this is the poet Mary Oliver's "Black Snake," lifeless in the road, "cool and gleaming as a braided whip" a stark, ghastly image of death and "its suddenness, its terrible weight, its certain coming."

I've heard this wilderness concept described by one preacher, The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Lyman, as a "Baked Alaska spiritual experience. Both hot and cold are going on at once: comfort and terror, coming to realize a truth and being scared out of your wits. Like falling in love, holding your first child in your arms, landing a great job, or feeling the plane take off for your long desired and now here vacation experience." Wilderness as the place for Jesus' spiritual and physical transformation is therefore beautiful and deadly, the sort of place for God to get your attention. Wilderness in the Bible is not a picture on the Sierra Club Calendar. Rather, wilderness is the untamed, unsettled,

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unknown place; you are in the *wild* (trans. in English) where one can become lost and die. The word bewildered comes from this root, from losing your way. If there is one thing we can glean from the context of the season of Lent, it is that in the wilderness, the wild, Jesus learned to discern between good and evil. Organized religion is not big on teaching a spirituality of bewilderment, for encouraging us to find wisdom through hard knocks and terror. Monastic communities, spiritual gurus, books about the purpose-driven life, the rigors of academic religious study could all be considered ways to keep us out of the wilderness or at least as Rebecca suggested, allow us to go on escorted tours.

So we are 25 days into Lent, this period of forty days of reflection and sacrifice modeled after Jesus' time in the wilderness. *Forty days and forty nights you were fasting in the wild; forty days and forty nights tempted and yet undefiled* were the words from our opening hymn this morning. I recognize that many here perhaps have not come traditions that emphasize the seasons of the Christian year like Lent or Advent or Epiphany. So with that in mind let me say that I like to think of Lent as spiritual spring-cleaning, or the chance to give up or change some poor habits or it's the opportunity to add a good practice to your life such as meditation or prayer or community service. Coincidentally, I must tell you about an e-mail I received this week. A comment I made in a sermon last year in which I lamented the fact that Girl Scout cookies always seemed to come out during Lent appeared in the Heard around Campus e-magazine recently. Here's the e-mail:

Dear Reverend Sanders:

I read your quote about Girl Scout cookies and Lent in the Heard on Campus section of the monthly e-magazine from Stanford. On behalf of all the girls who were selling cookies in front of the Bookstore for four weeks, I apologize for tempting you on such a regular basis. The bookstore is one of our best selling locations, especially on weekdays.

We do have some varieties that do not have chocolate -- have you tried any?

I would be happy to get you whatever variety you would like after Lent is over since I feel responsible for your anguish.

*Sincerely,
Cookie Sale Chairman, Girl Scouts of Palo Alto
(which includes the Stanford campus)*

I do not by any means want to make light of sacrifice or discipline. While it is well and good, it's important to remember what it is all for. None of us here this morning I suspect live in monastic communities, but live in a spiritual story that is not that of a guru under a tree. At the beginning of Lent, Rebecca reminded me that Jesus did not leave his busy life to be enlightened, and then return to teach us placidly how to be self actualized. He lived in the midst, she said, of everything and everybody and was snatched out of an

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active life of service. The practices of Lent don't prepare us for a vacation. The practices of Lent prepare us to endure the worst of life.

The story that is yet to come, the foreshadowing Mary Oliver wrote of as *its suddenness, its terrible weight, its certain coming* is Holy Week— a terrible story indeed of a man horribly executed and betrayed after a life of self-less love. It is indeed itself a wilderness, a darkness, where intense suffering and ultimately death makes us grapple with why bad things happen to good people. Or to learn how to embrace things we did not choose or harness any morsel of hope in a world, or even a life, spinning out of control.

Wherever you locate yourself on the faith or spiritual spectrum, the model of Jesus in the wilderness is about the call to enter in our lives most deeply, even where there is pain or fear. In other words, developing strategies for humanness. Faith still means finding the courage to love when your heart has been trampled on; the perspective to see your value and self-worth no matter what the final grade is; the determination to hope when the news and headlines give us every reason not to. When I read the most current statistics this week on the war in Iraq (whose 3rd year mark we passed on March 18) – 2,519 US led coalition deaths, 17,000 wounded, to an estimate of anywhere between 30,000-100,000 Iraqi deaths – I felt a shiver up my spine. The cycles of violence and retaliation have been set in motion and appear to be relentless as a result.

The wilderness exam that Jesus endured and the one that the psalmist further illuminated today: *they who wandered restless in the wilderness, in the desert pathways...and could not find a settled place...* is offered as a guide and model and resource for how to enact deliberate strategies to embrace not only who we are called by God to be, but how to embrace our God-given humanity.

I'm sure that students taking exams this past week hardly felt like experts with the material. In fact, exams feel like something you wish you could avoid. The same can be said of the wilderness in the narratives of Lent: it is not the spiritual home of the experts, but something to be avoided. Perhaps what this tells us is that our God-given humanity is the wilderness of our lives – that what we fear and avoid is in fact the fabric of everyday life. How do we live as faithful people in a violent, cruel world? We hardly feel like experts in that either. Life itself is the wilderness. How do you prepare for that? Try creating an outline or study notes for that one and see how far it gets us.

So while Lent is about reflection and discipline, it's also about renewal. And if I asked for a show of hands this morning about how many of us would be up for a little of that in our lives, I imagine a 100% response. The problem is that the idea of spirituality or being faithful often teeters on becoming far too romanticized. God is ordered and disciplined and my life is unruly and a mess.

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The gritty foundation of an authentic spiritual life is the wilderness times we've survived and truly experienced grace. For myself it has been the process of coming out and living as an openly gay woman, the sudden death of my 22 month old niece, and blind marginalizing by institutions you give your heart and soul to. I did not of course seek any of these out, but they did find me and I've learned from them through endurance and pain and surprise. And I've discerned through them that there's a wildness in God's mercy, a wildness that cannot be parsed, dissected, or domesticated.

It is in this precise place of wildness that we can in fact embrace the reality of God's love and understand our own humanity and mortality. That we are too wild beasts in the wilderness that can also be bewildered by God's grace. Woven in and throughout the narratives of Hebrew Scripture and gospels we are grounded in the reality of God's love, expressed in God's covenantal relationship with us, even in the wilderness of life and the chaos of a world filled with war, genocide, and violence. These Lenten texts, as troubling and disconcerting as they may be, encourage us to take risks – and move ever closer to a God who is wild and unpredictable; a God who offers covenantal relationship with us in ways beyond our deserving; a God who encompasses deep polarities and unsettling paradoxes – paradoxes which ultimately set us free and create us anew, not only during Lent but in every season of our lives. There are still 15 full days that remain in Lent. I encourage us to use it to seek to find where God may be in our lives and what we can do in this world. We do not need to be experts.

Therefore we brim with thanks for your steadfast love. We who wander restless in the wilderness, in the desert pathways and cannot find a settled place. We cry out to you with souls grown faint and you deliver us to a settled place. Gratitude to you, in the goodness of your nature, your steadfast love never ends. Amen.

Acknowledgements:

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