

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
February 19, 2012

WILDERNESS EXAMS

We are in the thick of winter quarter here at Stanford and many students are enduring mid-term exams, looming deadlines, the rapid pace and pulse of this high-octane campus. Living and working in academia can be like living in a wilderness. It can be exciting, invigorating, misleading, lonely, or even a struggle to survive. We are on the cusp of the current liturgical season known as Lent in the Christian calendar, which has something to say about living in a wilderness as well.

The spiritual landscape of Lent, the forty-day period that begins in three days on Ash Wednesday, is a season of soul-searching, spiritual recalibration if you will. Some say it is a call to renew a commitment grown dull, perhaps, by a life more marked by routine than reflection. By this time, the newness of the new year has surely worn off and most of us are no doubt deeply settled into our routines, maybe even drowning in them. This season known as 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 proverbial wilderness for forty days.

With that said, the gospel narratives of this Lenten season do not begin with angels and shepherds, but in the wilderness where Jesus, after his own baptism as in today's gospel, 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 ushers us into Lent finds himself utterly alone, susceptible to temptation, extraordinarily vulnerable. In the Psalm that Richard read we ask to know the ways of God, profess a desire to be led in God's truth and pledge to wait all day long. Further along in this Psalm we even admit to troubles of the heart, which we had perhaps hoped to keep hidden. To trust in a steadfast love of God is to be reminded that wherever we are, wilderness or otherwise, we have been held, are held and will be held in the strong, mysterious and gentle care of God. We have a future with God. We step onto a path and make our way on this pilgrimage called Lent.

I've heard this wilderness concept described by one preacher 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, graduating, landing a great job or fellowship, or feeling the plane take off for a long awaited and long desired journey." 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, 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

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between good and evil. Our religious traditions are not necessarily big on teaching a spirituality of bewilderment, for encouraging us to find wisdom through hard knocks and terror. Needless to say, monastic communities, spiritual gurus, books about the purpose-driven life, the rigors of even academic religious study could all be considered ways to keep us out of the wilderness or at least allow us to go on escorted tours. The ever-insightful teacher and preacher, Walter Bruggemann, refers to Lent as a time for “heavy lifting and hard work, when we replicate the followers of Jesus in their decision to follow him into Jerusalem, there to face the power of Rome and the colluding local authorities. We are forever re-deciding about following...or not.” “What we really do not want,” says Bruggemann, “is to be inconvenienced. That seems more troublesome than even dying.”

I recognize that many here perhaps have not come from spiritual traditions that emphasize the seasons of the Christian year like Lent or Advent or Epiphany. With that in mind let me say that I like to think of Lent as spiritual recalibration, the chance to practice some particular spiritual discipline that calls us to pay attention, stretches us to look for signs of new life in the wilderness. Some of us might add or take away something – add prayer or meditation, volunteer work or take away – chocolate, coffee, even texting or Facebook, God forbid. I made a comment a few years ago by lamenting in a sermon from this very pulpit the fact that Girl Scout cookies always seem to be sold during Lent. That lamentation appeared in our Heard around Campus e-magazine. Then I received this 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 Stanford 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, but share this story for a little levity this morning. While embracing some Lenten disciplines can be 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, I've been reminded that Jesus did not leave his busy life

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to be enlightened, and then return to teach us placidly how to be self actualized. He lived in the midst of everything and everybody and was snatched out of an active life of service. The practices of Lent don't prepare us for a vacation. The practices of Lent may instead prepare us to endure the worst of life. "If Lent," wrote Walter Bruggemann, "is the hard work and decision about following and replicating and echoing, then Lent this time around is intense. It is intense because the grip of the empire is so palpable among us. It surely takes the form among us of economic savagery and we find ourselves in the company of the poor man of Nazareth who found companionship among the marginal who were spellbound by his teaching, his wonders, and his person. "The contemporary issues," suggests Bruggemann, "are too urgent and too demanding to conduct "the same old Lent" without the struggle with the embodiment of Lenten truth in public crisis."

The story that is yet to come, the foreshadowing poet 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. We can think of many contemporary examples. Wilderness moments can teach us 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; the courage to put ourselves in the middle of a long and enduring fight to bring justice to all the ends of the earth.

The wilderness exam that Jesus endured 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 also how to embrace our God-given humanity. The wild beasts in today's gospel may be in fact signs of transformation and a model of Jesus' entire ministry – moving into places of darkness and struggle and yet bringing glimpses of the possibilities of God's presence, life and work in their midst. It does not demand perfection or even pretending that we know the way forward, but rather paying attention, showing up in the midst of the heavy lifting.

I imagine that Stanford students taking mid terms exams recently 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 crazy, cruel world? We

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hardly feel like experts in that either. Life itself is the wilderness. How do you prepare for that?

So while Lent may be about reflection, repentance, recalibration, I think it is 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.

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 on the California roller coaster called Proposition 8 and also an ordained priest, the target of blame for much derision in our beloved Episcopal Church. There have been others. 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. I know each and every one of you has examples of your own wilderness times, where the wildness of God's mercy may have even stunned you.

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. There is renewal in that. That we are too wild beasts in the wilderness that can also be bewildered by God's grace. We have a place in that landscape. 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 strife, uncertainty, bigotry, and injustice. 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. I encourage us, all of us, to use this coming holy season to seek to find where and who God may be in our lives and what we can do in this world that indeed continues to require serious heavy lifting. We are not expected to be experts. We are expected to take our place in this beautiful and bewildering landscape called life.

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.