

I wonder. Have you ever been in the wilderness? I am not talking about a tourist trip such as this, with the locations of watering holes plotted with a GPS (global positioning system) and available on iMap, padded seats on the tour bus, and me: your wilderness tour-guide. The kind of trip to the wilderness that I am wondering if you have made is more “interior” in nature, a dark night of the soul that can stretch on for days or weeks or even years.

Our journey today, our tour today, is to discover **lessons from the wilderness** while in the safety of this congregation, surrounded and sustained by the love of God and the love of others here present. This is an important safety feature, because one of the primary landmarks of wilderness—this interior place of threat and chaos—is the feeling that we get that we are utterly alone. The wilderness is, by my definition, a hard place, a scary place, a place that becomes a test, a trial. The wilderness is a place we need to get through to get to someplace good. We feel alone in the wilderness because God seems to have abandoned us. But, paradoxically, the wilderness is where we can meet God in new ways and be formed by him.

The **first lesson from the wilderness** is that God is *always* with us, even when we feel utterly alone, even in the wilderness. If you recall the whole story of Exodus, God was with the people in the wilderness. He had led them by day from within a cloud that moved before them, letting them know where to go, and God led them by night from within a pillar of fire. So, day and night, God was visibly with his people. Yet in our Old Testament passage today the people are in the desert with no water, they are in the wilderness.

At this point you might be wondering what kind of lesson this is. Does God lead us to our wilderness experiences? Some people have concluded from today’s Old Testament reading that yes, God leads us into the wilderness specifically to put us to the test there. This interpretation has long-standing history within Christianity. However, in today’s reading we do not hear about the cloud or the pillar of God. What we hear instead is that the people “journeyed in stages, as the Lord commanded.” So the people didn’t see God there with them, and the people didn’t feel God there with them.

I am not convinced that God leads us to the wilderness to test us. Perhaps he does. But I want to consider another possibility. What if the wilderness is just there and we need to get through it to get to where God wants us to be? The Israelites were slaves in Egypt and God promised to free them and to give them their own land, a land—as you well know—flowing with milk and honey. But between Egypt and this Promised Land was a vast wilderness. God might not cause the wilderness, but he knows the wilderness well and he knows that the wilderness is part of the landscape of our lives. So I have come to believe that God has a reason to lead any of us, his beloved children, into and through the wilderness, a purpose of great importance. And the purpose is that the wilderness lies on the way to, the wilderness lies in the way of, the Promised Land. But God is with us in the wilderness. Didn't God say that he would never leave us or forsake us?¹ Yes, the **first lesson from the wilderness** is that God is *always* with us, even when we feel utterly alone, even in the wilderness.

The **second lesson of the wilderness** is that to feel God's presence there we have to go to God. God is with us, but we have to intentionally turn to and go to God. In our Old Testament lesson today God tells Moses:

Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.

Now *we know* that God is everywhere. We know by our **first lesson from the wilderness** that God is *always* with us, even when we feel utterly alone, but in this passage God tells Moses where to find him. We know that God was *with* Moses and the elders AND all the Israelites the whole time. Yet the people were just not feeling that God was there with them. So what is this journey-to-God about? The apostle Paul explains the wilderness this way. He says:

we ... glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.²

¹ [Deuteronomy 31:6](#), NIV

² [Romans 5:3b-5](#), NIV

I don't know about you, but I find it hard to glory in my sufferings. Secretly the hope I often have is to be spared this kind of "growth opportunity." Secretly I hope to be the exception, the one who gets to skip suffering, who gets to skip joblessness, who gets to skip being betrayed, who gets to skip homelessness, who gets to skip a relationship gone bad, who gets to skip divorce, who gets to skip not seeing my children—even if they live with me, who gets to skip poverty, who gets to skip disease and even death. And when I have been in the desolation of the wilderness, armed with my denial, it was very hard to reach for hope and go to God.

There are other approaches to the wilderness experience, of course. Have you ever known someone stuck in the wilderness and angry about being there? Those familiar with the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross³ will recognize her five stages of grief at play here. In Kübler-Ross' model of grief, anger is the second stage. At first there comes denial, "That won't happen to me!" or, when the worst DOES happen, "This can't be real!" Second comes anger, "Who is to blame?" Third comes bargaining, "I'll do X, God, if only you do Y." Fourth comes depression, "What's the point?" And finally comes acceptance, "It's going to be okay." This acceptance is the hope that St. Paul talks about. Our psyches needs these stages to protect us in our grief, but we cannot use them against God, we cannot use them to blame God.

Those who are angry at being in the wilderness are stuck in the anger stage of their grief. The Israelites are angry and blaming Moses, they were angry and blaming God, but they were also in great denial. Somehow they had forgotten all God had done for them to free them from Egypt. Had they but remembered what God had already done for them they could have redirected their focus from their present suffering to their past deliverance. Remembering what God has already done for us is a step toward God. Had they but remembered what God had promised to do for them they could have redirected their focus from their present suffering to their future deliverance. Remembering what God has promised to do for us is another step toward God. When we refocus in this way, when we take these steps to God, we see that God is right there with us, waiting for us

³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

to remember that God is the source of our life and hope and joy, in the past and in the future, and even in the present. Yes, the **second lesson of the wilderness** is that to feel God's presence in the wilderness we have to go to God—the God who is right there with us, the God who always has been and always will be with us.

The **last lesson we can learn from the wilderness** is to look around to see what and who is at hand, and tap the very “One” who gives us life and love and hope and joy and praise. As improbable as it sounds, the Israelites had at their disposal an ample water supply. They had God and a rock. God told Moses to go to him “on the rock at Horeb,” God's holy mountain, and to tap the rock. After Moses had done as God had commanded, water came freely forth, baptizing the people in God's love and promise and provision. The great prophet Isaiah mentions this rock at Mount Horeb. He says, “Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.”⁴

We, too, have a God-rock, an everlasting rock, the very rock which the Spirit of Christ has transformed into his church—the very church that reminds us of God's presence with us when we are in denial or when we are angry at God.⁵ This is the very church that we promise to give all our money to and attend every week—every day, even!—when we are bargaining with God. This is the very rock, the very Spirit, the very church, which we know will be with us to this earth's end and will await us when we see God face to face.

Every so often God accompanies us to this rock, so that we can practice turning to God and tapping the rock. Tapping the rock allows the Holy Spirit to flow, even when we are in the wilderness, providing holy water to quench our thirst and love to fill our soul. This is the rock that gives water to remind us of the need to give joy and praise and thanks to God for life itself, and for life eternal. Yes, the **last lesson we can learn from the wilderness** is to look around to see what and who is at hand, and tap the very One who gives us life and love and hope and joy and praise.

⁴ [Isaiah 26:4](#)

⁵ [1 Corinthians 10:1-4](#)

Why are there wilderness experiences? We don't know. But we do know that "wilderness happens" and wilderness is between where we are and where we need to be. And we know that God accompanies us all the way, even if we don't perceive that he is there with us. Going to God while we are in the wilderness allows God to transform us, preparing us for eternity, if only we turn to him and tap the rock that God has given us. Come, tap the Rock.