

LESSONS FROM THE WILDERNESS
SECOND BAPTIST LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
February 7, 2008
POST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
February 10, 2008
Matthew 4: 1-11, Luke 4:1-13, Mark 1:12-13

There used to be a time when checking into rehab was an honorable and respectable thing to do when someone had realized there was nothing more they could do for themselves and they needed others to help them. Rather than discuss the parade of recent celebrities who have used rehab as a way to escape responsibility and accountability, I want to share the insights I gained from watching a late night interview Larry King did with the great baseball player, Mickey Mantle, about a year before his death in the summer of 1995.

As you know, I grew up in upstate New York in the sixties and seventies and what you probably don't know, is that I loved watching Yankee baseball as a girl. So that night as Kyle and I were flipping through the channels, I was fascinated to hear Mickey Mantle talk about his alcoholism and his many regrets in the way he had lived his life. He described his experience at the Betty Ford Clinic as a time in which he acknowledged his drinking problem, listened to the problems other people had with their

addictions, and spent much of his time alone reflecting on his life. He reported that the only contact he was allowed with the outside world during his stay was two telephone calls each Saturday and a few hours of television every Sunday. As I listened to Mickey Mantle talk on that night years ago, I realized he was sharing with thousands of people a wilderness experience which was difficult and challenging, yet very necessary for his healing and for the chance to begin living in new ways.

Mickey Mantle's wilderness experience was a "time out" to journey inward to explore the uncultivated region of his soul; a stopping of the flow of his life as he knew it, to redirect his energies, priorities, and passions for living. I believe it was his time in the wilderness that best prepared him to deal with his liver failure the next summer and to face his untimely death with courage, dignity, and grace.

I work as a chaplain for Hospice of Lubbock. Hospice of Lubbock is our area's only non-profit hospice organization that cares for people with terminal illnesses at the end of their lives. Our team of doctors, nurses, social workers, home health aids, volunteers and chaplains attempts to keep the dying people comfortable and help them and their families prepare physically, emotionally, and spiritually for death. Everyday I meet people who are living in the wilderness.

Webster's dictionary defines wilderness as "an uninhabited and uncultivated region." When we have lost our job, when our spouse of twenty years is diagnosed with a brain tumor, when we first find out we are unable to have children, when a loved one dies, when we are unsatisfied in our marriage, when our parents divorce, and when our jobs bring us more stress than fulfillment --- each of these wilderness times threaten our sense of security, our sense of identity, and our sense of faith. Whether we are thrust into the wilderness by change, misfortune, or tragedy, or whether we choose to enter the wilderness for our own good, as Mickey Mantle did, we, like Jesus can learn much from the chaos, confusion, and temptations of wilderness times.

The traditional text for the first Sunday in Lent is Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness after his baptism. Matthew and Luke report that, "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Mark's account is much more harsh, "The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan." How can a God who "can not be tempted with evil and himself tempts no one" inflict such treatment upon one to whom the divine voice has just said, "Thou art my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased!"

I don't know about you but I do not like this picture of God driving or even leading Jesus into the wilderness and then allowing Satan to tempt Jesus in order to test his faith, his fortitude, and his allegiance. I have never been comfortable with the theology that says God caused your little girl to die, your house to catch on fire, your father to have an automobile accident just so you can learn a lesson and affirm God's goodness and greatness. I also want to throw up when someone attempts to encourage a grieving person by assuring them after a great loss that, "God never gives us more than we can handle."

I do not believe that God tempts us with tragedies and causes the horrors that some people must endure. Thankfully our scripture for today affirms this -- the text in all three gospels states clearly that while it was the Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness, it was Satan who tempted him. Therefore, the first thing that is affirmed from Christ's experience in the wilderness is that while God allows bad, difficult, and tragic things to happen to us all, God does not purposefully cause them.

A mother whose four-month old son died this winter said this to me, "I'm tired of people telling me that God needed another little angel in heaven so God took my son and I should feel honored." My response to her was "I'm tired of people "reassuring" you and

other parents in this way. I do not believe that God purposefully takes children or anyone by death. I believe God allows unfortunate and tragic things to happen to us all but I do not believe God causes children to die or misfortunes to happen.

Another lesson we learn from the wilderness is that life is often ambiguous and unclear. We cannot know for sure about many things, we cannot have everything in our lives be perfect, and we cannot control many aspects of our lives. We are not responsible for everything that happens nor can we change everything that happens. We all live with unknowns and are called upon to do our best.

In the last part of her book, **It's Always Something**, the very funny, comedienne from Saturday Night Live, Gilda Radner, writes about her struggle to do her best in the midst of facing the unknown consequences of her battle against ovarian cancer. She says this:

I had wanted to wrap this book up in a neat little package about a girl who is a comedienne from Detroit, becomes famous in New York, with all the world coming her way, gets this horrible disease of cancer, is brave and fights it, learning all the skills she needs to get through it, and then,

miraculously, things are neatly tied up and she gets well. I wanted to be able to write on the book jacket: "Her Triumph Over Cancer" or "She Wins the Cancer War." I wanted a perfect ending to my story, so I sat down to write the ending to my book before there even was an ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle or end. Like my life, this book has ambiguity. Like my life, this book is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next.

As the noted Episcopal theologian, John Claypool, puts it, "We do not first get all the answers and then live in light of our understanding. We must rather plunge into life - meeting what we have to meet and experiencing what we have to experience -- and in the light of living try to understand. If insight comes at all, it will not be before, but only through and after experience."

The wilderness experience also teaches us in profound ways that God is indeed actively present with us in the midst of the chaos, confusion, and temptations. In wilderness times, we usually have more of a sense of God's absence than we do of God's presence. We wonder in the midst of our pain and despair, "Where is God?"

"Does God really care about what has happened to me?" "Why me, why this, O Lord?" Despite feelings of abandonment and lostness during the times we are in the wilderness, we are often able to look back and see how God was truly present with us. In our scripture for today, Mark frames Jesus' struggle against the hostile powers of Satan and the beasts by mentioning the spirit of God that sends him to the wilderness at the beginning and the angels of God that sustain him in the testing at the end. Satan's power in this story is very real but limited because of the presence of God from beginning to end.

In our day-to-day encounter with the forces of change, violence, disease, and death in our world, it is not realistic for us to hope dreamily for some heavenly South Sea Island where everything would be easy, safe, and known. Our basic hope is not that life will cease to be difficult or that we will be exempt from difficulty, struggle, and pain. Neither does our hope lie in seeing God as a clever magician or friendly wizard who will make everything better if we are good. Rather, our hope lies in seeing God as one who lives and suffers with us in the midst of an imperfect world.

A 46-year old woman with colon cancer said to me recently that when the doctors at M.D. Anderson told her there was nothing more they could do to treat her cancer, she asked God, "Why me?"

Why this? Why now?" She said that she was angry and sad for about a week and then she asked God to forgive her for questioning him (which I told her was okay), she asked God to help her be grateful for the life she has left to live, and she asked God to give her the energy she needs to prepare her family for the time when she will no longer be with them physically. She said that each night she thanks God for the day and the things she was able to do to get things in order. She said she tells God that if it is his will for her to not wake up then she is okay with that. And then each morning when she does awaken, she thanks God for the gift of another day.

We can rest assured that when we find ourselves wandering in the turbulence of wilderness times we will not be alone --- the compassionate Holy One will always be there in our midst giving us strength, love, nurture, and healing to move forward whether it is towards greater life in this world or greater life in the world that is promised to us beyond our deaths. A story Gilda Radner told in her book paints an inspirational picture of how we can choose to get on with our lives after facing the difficulties, suffering, and challenges of wilderness living.

She said, "when I was little my cousin, Dibby, had a dog, just a mutt, and the dog was pregnant. Now I

don't know how long dogs are pregnant, but she was due to have her puppies in about a week. She was out in the yard one day and got in the way of the lawn mower, and her two hind legs got cut off. They rushed her to the vet and he said, 'I can sew her up, or you can put her to sleep if you want, but the puppies are okay. She'll be able to deliver the puppies just fine.' Dibby said, 'Keep her alive!' So the vet sewed up her backside and over the next week the dog learned to walk again. She didn't spend any time worrying; she just learned to walk by taking two steps in the front and flipping up her backside, and then taking two steps and flipping up her backside again. She nursed them and then she weaned them. And when they learned to walk, they all walked like she did!"

Like these dogs, our wilderness experiences usually leave their scars and when we eventually emerge from the wilderness, we do so as changed people. Looking back, it often seems miraculous that we ever emerge from the wilderness at all. I believe that we are able to emerge from wilderness experiences because we were touched by the presence of God -- incarnated sometimes in words, sometimes in stories, but most of the time incarnated by the unknown angels who waited on us-- people who believed in us

when we couldn't believe in ourselves, loved us when we felt most unlovable, and cared for us in ways which renewed confidence and strength, and nurtured healing and hope. In Jesus, God not only demonstrates that our pain belongs to sense and meaning, God also sews up the torn places and anoints our scars.

In his book, **Den of Lions**, former hostage Terry Anderson, a correspondent for the Associated Press who was captured in Lebanon in 1985 during the Iran-Contra affair, relates what it was like to exist for almost seven years in darkness and chains, not knowing from one day to the next how much longer he would be a prisoner or if he would be released from captivity or killed. Terry Anderson's memoir is not only about how he survived, but also about how his spirit endured and even triumphed. He wrote this about his relationship with the woman who waited for him for seven years:

Madeleine and I were married on April 18, 1993, before a few friends and family in the living room of the old home we bought late last year. We cannot say we have come "full circle," because we are a long way from where and whom we were when we first planned to marry, nine years ago. Much of that distance we traveled separately, enduring our own private trials and pain. We had many close and dear friends

to help us and we had the knowledge of each other's love to sustain us. But we also had the terrible uncertainty of what those years were doing to us, fearing that the changes we saw in ourselves, and knew were happening to the other, would somehow overwhelm that love. We were forced to look inside ourselves, alone, to find the strength and faith we both needed so desperately.

It has been at times difficult, but always fascinating. There has been far more joy than tears, and enormous happiness. The warmth and the concern shown for us by everyone, everywhere we go, has helped greatly. While no one chooses the kind of terrible events that engulfed us, we have much to be thankful for out of those years of testing. We know ourselves, and each other, much better than we might have. We know the depth and strength of our love. And we have a deeper, stronger faith in God. Nietzsche wrote, "That which does not destroy me, makes me stronger." We are stronger, and our life is full of joy.

It is my prayer that during this season of Lent we will be open to where the Spirit of God is leading. May we remember to be aware of the presence of our compassionate God, especially during difficult times when we are tested, tried and tempted. And may we

always trust that angels will indeed be waiting with us and for us not only to help us endure but to see us through with much grace and love and then to guide us to life beyond. **AMEN**

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SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH

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“THE WILDERNESS LESSONS OF LENT”

QUOTES ABOUT LENT:

In a journal entitled, **The Living Pulpit** from January – March 2000, the editor began with this provocative Lenten suggestion: “In an age of quick-fixes, fast food, instant gratification and Internet communication, the Lenten tradition seems like an ancient practice that is out of step with the age. Lent promises no immediate result, no instant answer, or no dazzling communication from on high. Rather, Lent is a call to disciplined inquiry and a patient searching after the presence of God.”

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.”

Terry Anderson concludes his book, **The Den Of Lions**, with a poem about his wilderness experience:

We can never start anew completely; we're everything we've ever done or said or failed to do.

Each bit is added on, altering the whole, but covering, not replacing what has gone before.

A piece of unfired clay, we bear the marks and scars of all our years. Not just clay, though--sculptor, too; we help to mold ourselves.

Object, artist, audience. Sometimes, though, larger hands--destiny, fate, God--take firmly hold and, wielding fierce events, risk fracture to hack and carve away some awkward, ugly bits.

The final work cannot be seen until it's fired, and all fires cooled. The apostle Paul knew: suffering and pain are the truest ways, the only ways for some of us, to draw out that from within which answers to the purpose of it all.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and faithful God, as we gather in this place again with our family and our friends, we pray that in the quiet of these precious moments we share together we might have a heightened awareness of the love that has claimed us and the grace that continues to sustain us. May our sitting, thinking, singing, and praying together open our eyes, ears, and hearts more fully to the miracles of your presence with us and in us. Life is often difficult and we get overwhelmed by the many responsibilities, challenges, and problems we face in our work, families, and community affairs. Enable us to be patient, diligent, and compassionate as we relate to others and seek to live lives of meaning, purpose, and faith.

When we find ourselves in the midst of the wilderness and we are overwhelmed and unable to find our way very easily, help us to be open to the blessings that come to us in our poverty, grief, exhaustion and pain. When our world has been turned upside down, our backs are against the wall, we are powerless to change our circumstances and we have exhausted all of our available resources, may we be on the outlook for angels who are indeed waiting with us and for us not only to help us endure but to see us through with much grace and love and then to guide us to life beyond. May we be open to the surprises of God's grace that come to us as pure gifts and may we allow them to fill our lives, nurture

our souls and strengthen our faith in ways we could never ever do for ourselves.

We are humbled by the great gift of life we have been given and we pray for the courage to never take our limited time here for granted. We pray on this day for our friends and loved ones experiencing grief, sickness, change, recovery, and healing. In their moments of despair, confusion, and pain, help them to know they are not alone and that your presence with us provides strength, comfort, and perspective. As we seek to help our family, friends, and neighbors, we ask that you would use our words and actions to communicate your words and life to us all. Let us pray together, “Our Father, who art in heaven...