

SERMON for Sunday, February 25, 2007
 Preached on March 4, 2007
 Luke 4:1-13

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I'm Not Going!

Last week we were all in the wilderness of snowfall, and missed the opportunity to start our Lenten season with traditional lesson. Each year, and this year, despite a blizzard, will be no exception, we mark the beginning of Lent violently, reading of the adventures of Jesus in the wilderness. This was not a voluntary stroll in the park. In the narration of the events of the life of Jesus, Jesus was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. He didn't get to enjoy that status in the way that we think he might, when we speak of someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit, whose soul is stirred and in whom we see God's gentle presence. No, immediately after John baptized Jesus in the waters of the Jordan, when the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, when a voice from heaven said, *You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased*, Jesus is led into the wilderness. In fact, in the story as it is told in the gospel of Mark, the Greek word means *hurled*, Jesus is hurled into the wilderness. And there follows forty days of testing, of trial, of temptation. *Turn stones into bread!* Jesus refuses, knowing that only God can give such life-giving sustenance. *Worship the devil and you can have all the kingdoms of the world!* Jesus refuses, knowing that genuine power comes only from God, and only God is to be worshipped. *Throw yourself down and see if the angels will protect you!* Jesus refuses, for true faith is trust and dependence in God. What an experience for Jesus, the intensity of trial that we will never know. When we begin our Lenten observance, we say that we will walk with Jesus, we will follow Jesus, we will live with Jesus. But *I'm not going* there, into the wilderness, with Jesus.

The Midwest's own, Garrison Keillor, who had made being a midwesterner a national source of pride, has also made being a Lutheran a matter of distinction. He said this about *Singing with the Lutherans*: *I have made fun of Lutherans for years – who wouldn't if you lived in Minnesota? But I have also sung with Lutherans and that is one of the main joys of life, along with hot baths and fresh sweet corn. We make fun of Lutherans for their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their lack of speed and also for their secret fondness for macaroni and cheese. But nobody sings like them. If you ask an audience in New York City, a relatively Lutheranless place, to sing along on the chorus of 'Michael Row the Boat Ashore', they will look daggers at you as if you had asked them to strip to their underwear. But if you do this among Lutherans they'll smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach! And down the road! Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. It's talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage...I once sang the bass line of 'Children of the Heavenly Father' in a room with about three thousand Lutherans in it; and when we finished, we all had tears in our eyes, partly from the promise that God will not forsake us, partly from the proximity of all those lovely voices. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other.*

It is this version of wilderness that we would somehow prefer, where we are cradled in the arms of God never to fall down. Even the Psalmist assures us that *no evil will befall you, nor shall affliction come near your dwelling*. We lull ourselves into a kind of false spirituality, a shallow version of faith when we buy into the idea that somehow, if we give a nod to God by attending church every once in a while,

(although I realize that I am *preaching to the choir*, as it were), if we occasionally crack open the Bible that we received at Confirmation, if we say a grace of thanks before we eat our meals, if we try hard to be good and honest, that we will be protected from the wilderness. And we also believe, truly believe, that we can somehow avoid it by sheer will and determination. Olav Hartmann, Swedish clergyman, dramatist and storyteller, wrote a tale, *Holy Masquerade*, about a pastor's wife, and her journey through the season of Lent. The minister's wife Klara begins her diary, *This is the third time I have sat in church on a Sunday in Lent, and, while Albert has expounded the text about following the Master on the way of sorrows, have looked as attentive and as pious as is proper for the wife of a minister. No, I have no intention to follow Jesus. I want to continue to follow my common sense...* Like Klara, we sometimes refuse to follow Jesus, but it never works, even when we declare, *I'm just not going there!* We will be hurled into the wilderness, whether we like it or not.

We will find ourselves in the wilderness because we are afraid. There is a group of progressive Christians called *CrossWalk America*, some of whom have taken quite literally a journey across this country, and have listened to how people interpret their faith in these times in this country. Those of *CrossWalk America* don't have an agenda to preach, but began because they were tired of the way in which Christians are being portrayed by the media, as rigid supporters of the right-wing political agenda. Pastor Eric Elnes, a minister of the United Church of Christ from Phoenix, Arizona, one of the founders, reported last fall, *Over the course of its 2,500 mile trek, CrossWalk America has met with over 11,000 Christians, been hosted by nearly 150 churches, and stayed in over 200 homes. We have listened to literally thousands of faith stories. What we've discovered from these encounters is that Christian faith in America looks very different at ground level than what is commonly assumed by media pundits and religious leaders. Specifically, the classic stereotypes of liberal, moderate, and conservative simply do not apply to most Christians. For instance, what do you call a Christian who is against abortion but works tirelessly on behalf of the poor? How would you describe a biblical literalist who believes in full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people? Are these people conservative, liberal, or moderate? What about a Christian who prays in tongues and calls upon Jesus Christ as her only Lord and Savior, yet also believes God creates other paths for humanity besides Christianity?*

What they also discovered is that many of us are what they described as Holy Saturday Christians, like the disciples who locked themselves in upper rooms afraid to come out lest they be identified as followers of Jesus. This is the kind of fearful wilderness in which so many of us find ourselves. And we go there because we worry. What does come after death? How do we know what the Bible truly says about war and about homosexuality? Why is there so much tension in denominations about things that don't seem to matter? Why are congregations torn apart sometimes by disagreements? What answers do we have for the world's seekers? When we cannot answer all these questions, as they might be put to us by a reporter, or by our children, or by a non-believing co-worker, when we are not sure, we retreat into our own comfortable cocoons and closets, shutting the door. Emerging from the wilderness takes courage, it is a risky business to speak up and embrace everyone in the name of Christ, speak up for peace in the name of Christ, combat racism and poverty in the name of Christ. These are not political issues which have nothing to do with faith. Quite the opposite. To follow Jesus means to follow Jesus to the cross, where he died for our very lives, for the life of the world.

And we will find ourselves in the wilderness because we are humans who cannot be protected and immune from our humanity. There is no escaping those times of personal trial, sadness, death, loneliness, anxiety, worry, disease, and absolute wretchedness, when great heaving sobs engulf us and dark waves of trouble roll over us. When we sing the familiar old hymn, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, and we come to the part, *Have we trials and temptations, is there trouble anywhere?* We can answer with a resounding, *You bet there is!* But how we live within our humanity determines whether or not our wilderness journey is damaging, or healing. Do we merely look to Jesus for companionship when we are really in life's deep anguish, or do we seek to find Jesus in the faithful companionship of friends? Do we fling out a life-line to God, and try to strike a bargain, a *God if you do this, I will do this?* Do we only lean on God when all else fails? Often in the wilderness is where our faith is shallow, where we narrow our vision so that we don't see God in all the places that God can be, in the human company that is God-given, in the holy human strength of another who walks with us, in the sacred human murmurs of comfort, in the shadows.

And we will find ourselves in the wilderness when we seek safety. To live as one of God's own means to take a risk for love. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor begins a sermon on Lenten Discipline by describing why we need the season of Lent: *Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for – if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud.* Yes, even when we decide *I'm not going!* we are hurled into all kinds of wilderness.

Jesus did not find comfort in his forty days, and neither should we. But what Jesus did find was strength, and so shall we, to walk with Jesus, to follow where Jesus leads, to live as Jesus lived. And so we shall emerge into a new life of faith and trust. Thanks be to God. Amen.