

February 18, 2018: First Sunday of Lent (Year B)  
Mark 1:9-15: Wilderness

This past Wednesday during our Ash Wednesday service I introduced our theme for the Season of Lent. It is “Rehabilitation,” or “Rehab” for short. Before we move too far along I should tell you that I didn’t come up with the idea on my own. I got it from a worship resource created by the Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church. I have done a lot of work to adapt it to fit our context, but think it’s important to give credit where credit is due, and blame. So if you decide at any point that you don’t like it, you know whose fault it is, the United Methodist Church. And if you do find it meaningful, you can know it is because of all the changes I have made. The Methodists really are good people. If we ever decided to become part of a denomination again, they would be my first choice.

I mentioned on Wednesday that the first thing that comes to my mind when I hear the word “Rehab” is the song, by the same name, written by the late singer Amy Winehouse. I sang the first line of the chorus, and it was clear, nobody had ever heard it before. Either that or I was just so off it was not recognizable. You could have heard a pen drop, which would have sounded beautiful in the old church, because everything sounds beautiful in the old church, everything except my impression of Amy Winehouse.

The topic for this morning’s service is wilderness. I’m wondering what is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear that word? Wilderness.

The first thing that comes to my mind is (don’t worry, not a song), but a movie I must have watched at least twenty times as a kid. Probably more than that. The full title of the movie was “The Adventures of the Wilderness Family,” but we just knew it as “The Wilderness Family.” It was released in 1975, and I discovered, while doing research for the sermon, that it was actually the first in a series of three. We only saw the first one.

The movie was about a family of four living in the bustling city of Los Angeles. The father, Skip, was a construction worker, and was feeling overwhelmed by the daily routine of city-life, the traffic, the noise, and the smog. At the same time, his daughter, Jennifer, was struggling with a severe case of Asthma, which was made much worse on account of all the pollution. For all these reasons, and more, the family decided one day they had had enough. So they sold most of their belongings, packed up the few that remained, and moved to a secluded spot in the Canadian Rockies.

Their new home was the textbook definition of wilderness. There were no roads. You could only get there by sea-plane. And they didn’t own one, so once they were dropped off they had no way out for several months, until the pilot returned. There was no phone, no electricity, no running water, no grocery stores, no indoor plumbing. The only shelter was an old log cabin that was one strong gust of wind away from blowing over. There were plenty wild animals; bears, wolves, coyotes and raccoons. It was desolate, lonely, and isolated. It was wilderness. But it was beautiful.

You would struggle to find a more serene setting. Beautiful, snow-capped mountains. Forests filled with majestic hardwoods and evergreens. A clear blue lake teeming with fish. Fresh, clean, crisp air. And peace and quiet, lots of peace and quiet. You know how some movies make you want to do something. Whenever we watched Karate Kid my brother and sister and I would start karate-chopping one another. When we watched The Wilderness Family we would tell our parents we wanted to go camping. And who wouldn’t? The movie made the wilderness look amazing.

But we already kind of thought that. We, as a society, have a romanticized view of the wilderness. We dream about going there; the wild, untamed, unexplored, uninhabited parts of our world. Some historians have suggested it is part of our American DNA. That it was the allure of the wilderness that led the first European settlers to travel to this continent. It was the allure of the wilderness that provided the motivation for the rapid westward expansion that followed. That it was the allure of the wilderness that compelled us to explore other continents, after we had reached the western boundary of our own.

I would go one step farther and say it's not only part of the American DNA, but human DNA. Why else would we buy vehicles that can travel over mountain ranges, but at most, end up climbing over a curb on the way into a tight parking space? Or sleeping bags rated for 40 below zero, that will probably go no further than the carpeted floor of our guest room? Or campers with hot showers, air-conditioning, and cable television?

The truth is, the wilderness is no picnic. It doesn't take long to figure that out once you are actually there. The bugs, the poison ivy, the lack of all the comforts we have become accustomed to. The wilderness can be a miserable place. Sometimes, the wilderness isn't even a place at all, at least not a physical location.

Last week we read Mark's account of the transfiguration, when Jesus and his disciples traveled to the top of a very high mountain, and Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes. We talked about all the confusion on the part of the disciples, and their inability to understand, at least at that time, who Jesus truly was. Something we didn't talk about as much was what God said about Jesus, when he identified him as his beloved Son.

This was actually the second time God made that statement. This morning we read about the first, which happened when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Jesus' baptism was the event that signified the official beginning of his public ministry. While he did not get baptized as a sign of repentance, his baptism did serve as his opportunity to submit to God's plan for his life. The tearing open of the heavens, the Holy Spirit resting upon him, and God's words of affirmation to him all served the purpose of reminding him that God would be with him, no matter what path his life would take. And then immediately after being baptized he was driven into the wilderness.

The thing is, there is no wilderness in this region. There are places where a person could feel fairly isolated, where roads are hard to come by, but nothing like you or I would think of as wilderness. This tells us that the wilderness Jesus was thrust into was not entirely physical, but emotional and spiritual, maybe even psychological.

Mark doesn't go into as much detail as Matthew and Luke. All he tells us is that in this wilderness, Jesus was tempted by Satan. He was with wild beasts. And there were angels waiting on him. Thanks to Matthew and Luke we have some idea of the kind of temptations he faced; temptations to abuse his power, temptations to doubt God's protection, and temptations to do things according to his plan, not God's plan. But as to the identity of the wild beasts, all we have is our imagination. What do you imagine they might be? What do they look like in the wilderness you are facing?

The wilderness is an unavoidable part of our journey as Christians. And once you've been there, you know there's nothing romantic about it. It's a lonely place. It's a desolate place. It's an uncomfortable place. Sometimes it can even be a frightening place. The wilderness is that place where are stripped bare, metaphorically speaking, and we are forced to come to terms with who we really are, with all of our faults and all of our failures. The wilderness is where we come face to face with evil, both the evil

without, and the evil within. The wilderness is where we struggle to embrace the life God has for us, the life he wants for us, or take the easy way out, and pursue life as we define it. The wilderness is where we realize we are helpless, lost, in need of a Savior.

The experience of Jesus in the wilderness tells us some important things we need to know as we go through it.

The kind of wilderness we are talking about is something God is responsible for. Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that everything bad that happens to us is God's doing. We can experience difficult times in our lives for all kinds of reasons, on account of bad decisions we have made, or on account of bad decisions that other people have made, or just because. There doesn't always have to be a reason, or at least one that we can identify. But there is a type of wilderness that we will experience in life because God put us there.

As hard as it may be to understand, God drives us into the wilderness because he loves us, because he knows it is a necessary step on our journey toward fulfilling his plan for us, and experiencing the life he has for us. It was for Jesus. God knew what the future held for Jesus, so he needed to prepare him for what was coming. God may have a specific plan for each one of us, but his plan for all us is to grow into the image of Jesus. For that to happen, we have to come to the end of ourselves, we have to realize who we really are, and we have to learn to rely on God to help us. All this happens in the wilderness. The wilderness is a necessary first step toward rehabilitation.

In this wilderness, God is testing us, but it is Satan who is tempting us. The Scriptures are clear; God tempts no one. Satan tempts us, and he does so by appealing to the sinful desires inside each of us. But at the same time, God knows our limits. Once we belong to him, once we have passed through the waters of baptism, he will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. God will not put us into a situation where the temptation to sin will be greater than our ability to refuse. If we find ourselves in a situation where we cannot resist, it means that we put ourselves there.

In this wilderness, God is with us, guiding us, strengthening us, leading us safely through it. God does not drive us into the wilderness to face it alone. He is walking right beside us. If not him in person, he has untold angels at his disposal. Some of his angels are flesh and blood just like you and me, fellow human beings that he sends into our lives to help us. And although we may find ourselves in the wilderness more than once, maybe even several times in our lives, we know the wilderness doesn't last forever. It ends with transformation, and eventually leads to resurrection.

### **Prayer of Confession**

God, you are good and upright, and you instruct sinners in your ways,  
Show us how to break down the barriers separating us from each other,  
**Lead us through the wilderness sin has created to find new life.**

Forgive us for the times we have abandoned the poor,  
the disabled, and the homeless,  
Teach us to live by the law of love in unity, peace, and harmony.  
**Lead us through the wilderness sin has created to find new life.**

Forgive us for the ways we exclude people of different race, culture, or gender,  
Guide us that we may come to mutual understanding and care.

**Lead us through the wilderness sin has created to find new life.**

Draw us into your community to embrace those  
with whom we need to be reconciled,  
Grant that all who seek to heal divisions between peoples may have hope.

**Lead us through the wilderness sin has created to find new life.**

Show us your ways, O Lord,  
Set us free from our addictions and the things that hold us in bondage  
Teach us your paths and guide us towards your truth.

**Lead us through the wilderness sin has created to find new life.**

*Lighting the Lenten Candle*

Reader 1: As we begin this season of Lent we enter into the wilderness, prepared to face the truth of who we are, while we embrace the truth of who God is, and rejoice in the love He has for us.

Reader 2: We light this candle, remembering that we do not journey through the wilderness alone, that God goes before us, and walks beside us, and will bring us safely through.

(light the first candle)

Prayer: As we begin this Lenten season, dear God, remind us that you are the one who brings us safely through the wilderness, and that it is you who brings life to deserted places. In the name of Christ, with whom we journey toward the cross, we pray. Amen.