

Wilderness: Adam & Eve & Jesus

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Matthew 4:1–11

Did you feel the world turn a little bit this week? On Wednesday, known as Ash Wednesday, many of us gathered in this sanctuary and the fellowship room to mark the day and to mark ourselves. Ash Wednesday was the first day in this season that we call Lent, the season in church of the 40 days leading up to Easter.

Lent is a season that invites introspection and contemplation. It's quieter. Our music switches to minor key and we stop singing alleluias. We spend time in confessional prayer, asking to be forgiven and to forgive. It's a season when we might spend some time breathing in deeply the love of God, a balm that might soothe the sin-sick soul, as the old hymn says.

And in order to be introspective and to contemplate some of the deep mysteries of our faith, it means we are invited to be still. To take a Lenten pause, during the season that marks the lengthening of sunlight as we get closer to Easter means that we have pockets where we consider God and ourselves in this world.

During our Lenten worship, we'll be looking at some of our ancestors of faith who found themselves in a season riddled with questions of identity and who they understood God to be. Eve and Adam, Moses and the Israelite people, Samuel and David, Ezekiel, Jesus and his disciples—all we will encounter in a wilderness where they found deep clarity. We are choosing this Lenten theme, "Wilderness," because in a landscape or season with little else around us, we have space to encounter the wild, specifically the wildness of Holy Spirit at work in the world and in us.

And during this season of Lent, I hope you'll find ways to engage with these ideas of stillness and sparseness as a place of clarity and hope. We have our regular Tuesday Morning Bible Studies, but we're also offering an online Bible study on Tuesday evenings for three weeks. Our Sunday School classes are studying various topics. Our daily Lenten Devotional is themed around Wilderness and offers prompts and prayers to consider. We are intentionally offering less "stuff" this Lent to open up the possibility that you might have space to let the wilderness in, or maybe you even seek it out.

Lent begins in the wilderness. Our first passage this morning tells the story of a newly formed couple who, dusty as they were, didn't even know that they were created from the wilderness. That is, until they did know. They were created from the dirt of the ground with God's Spirit breathed into them, the breath of life. From dust they came and to dust they returned, and the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

When the wilderness became apparent to them, it was thanks to a tricky serpent, slithering around, serving as that tempter, that voice within, which was already questioning what they had been told. As the dustiness, coupled with the lushness of a garden in the wilderness grew around them, their eyes were opened and all of a sudden, they saw that the desire for provision, for power, and for protection was strong. But I guess they knew that even before their eyes were opened.

These two learned that they were God-breathed dust and they were human. So very, very human. And even as they wandered and learned of their fate, they still knew they were God's created ones, clothed with God's love, even when their dustiness was showing in the midst of the wilderness, east of the home they had known.

In that same region of the world where their story was told and held sacred, another wilderness opened up. Another wilderness we could say that was God-breathed. No sooner had Jesus come up out of the Jordan River, dripping wet, than he heard a voice from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. The Spirit of God came diving down and the next thing we know, that same Spirit, led Jesus into the wilderness.

Do you think he waved to John the Baptist as he left, laughing to himself because his cousin had already moved onto the next baptismal candidate? Do you think he was still wiping the Jordan River off of him as he followed God's Spirit that day? Do you think it was hot, so the coolness of the water drying on his skin was actually welcome?

It sounds like Jesus needed some time alone. 40 days exactly. Seems like a good amount of designated time to consider what your relationship with God looks like. Jesus fasted those days and nights in the wilderness.

While he was there he encountered that sneaky voice that our earlier couple also encountered. The tempter came and wanted Jesus to prove himself. Essentially that voice he heard in the wilderness was making him examine himself—would Jesus be held captive to provision, to power, to protection? Would Jesus, during those 40 days come out on the other side of the wilderness season and be one who was held captive by provision, by power, and by protection?

Or would he remember that moment of his baptism, right before he entered the wilderness when he was claimed as God's beloved?

Spoiler alert: we already know what happened when he left the wilderness because we spent the season after Jesus' baptism talking about what Jesus did on the other side of his wilderness season. As soon as Jesus denied the voice that wanted him to choose worldly power, he left the wilderness season and went out to create a different kind of community—a beloved community.

He left the wilderness, even more committed to this idea that all were God's beloved and he preached a little sermon we all know and love, the Sermon on the Mount. After that season, he knew even more deeply that his identity was not in relation to the empire that pretended to provide, protect, and empower. No, he belonged to God. And wanted others to know the same-- that maybe they were the light of the world, that they could pray to God, that they were enough.

Holy Spirit guided Jesus into the wilderness where he came face to face with temptation and struggle. Yet, in his forty days of fasting, resisting, and wandering, Jesus was shaped and formed for his ministry. Similarly, through the wilderness of Lent, we are invited to surrender to the wild leadings of the Spirit.

We rarely enter the wilderness willingly, but I'm inviting us to do that. And maybe, just maybe, through our wandering we remember who we are and whose we are. The season

of Lent is as good a time as any to examine why it was we cling to the false promises of provision, protection, and power. Why is it so hard for us to let go of those and instead claim our true identities and promises of God?

When we think that the tricky voice that we all hear has something better to offer us than goodness in community, we might need a stroll in the wilderness to clarify what that voice is asking of us and why.

Are we longing for provision beyond what we need that hurts our neighbors? Do we take more than we need? Are we showing up and voting in support of issues that demonstrate care?

Are we participating in power systems that deny basic human rights? Do we invest in companies that occupy land that does not belong to them?

Are we operating out of a fear-based ideology that thinks we need to be protected from people who are different from us? Do we exclude rather than embrace people who look differently, who believe differently, who disagree with us?

“Our work in this world, during this one wild and precious life, is to care for each other and receive care from each other. To create a world wherein care for people who are hurting, who have been harmed, who are right now being harmed by patterns and practices of dominance and greed and deadly indifference to shared flourishing is a priority, a promise, a practice we collectively commit to. With joy, and pleasure, and delight. Because we are stardust, holy dirt, sacred dust. Created good. Birthing life. Tending death. Surviving together, our survival depends upon each other. We are marked by mortality, and divinity, too, made from grit, and bound for grief, and glory, too.”¹

We learn who we are in the dustiness of the wilderness. We learn who God is in the wilderness.

We learn how to take the next step, how to find comfort with the unknown, and how to trust God’s call in the wilderness.

In the wilderness our faith is born, nurtured, challenged, and resurrected.

Clarity and hope can be found in the wilderness.

During these 40 days of Lent we move from ashes to the cross.

The wilderness is ours to explore because God is with us. God blessed us as Beloved and sends on our way with Holy Spirit to figure out what it means to live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Anna Blaedel, *enfleshed*. “Moments for Common Nourishment.”