

-Wilderness. This is a fascinating term which continues to percolate throughout life. How many of you have been out in the wilderness before? (being from Montana, I would expect most of you have). How many of you have had or are experiencing a “wilderness” in your lives? (raise hands) Notice how I didn’t really define the word before I asked those questions, so you had to make your own judgement on what wilderness means to you. This, ofcourse, can be a little problematic. Is wilderness a physical place, a state of mind/being, a way of living or some combination of each? Is wilderness a positive place or a negative place? Well, I think it can be a little bit of each, which makes it even harder to figure out how this term relates to us directly. Dan Spencer, a beloved member of our church family, teaches a course titled “Earth Ethics: Moral Dimensions of Environmental Issues” which spends an entire semester wrestling with what “wilderness” means in our society (Abby, my wife, who had Dan as a professor states it was one of the best courses she took at the University of Montana for her masters degree).

-Wilderness spans multiple definitions in scripture too. In Greek with our Gospel story today, Luke uses the *eremos* (isolated, solitary place). The most common word in Hebrew (Old Testament) is *midbar* which has the connotation of “unhabited land where human beings are guests”. Remember God’s commandment in Deuteronomy? “Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness”. This “remembering of wilderness” provides the backbone of Jewish faith and interaction with others, especially foreigners.

-So with all the breadth and depth of this fascinating word, “wilderness”, what and where does it point us in our Gospel story today?

-Well, here is the interesting thing about this well-known biblical story. I didn’t catch this until I read again during my sermon preparation. Verse one says: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” Jesus was LED into the wilderness.

-Many times we think of this story as a story of good vs. evil right: Jesus is required to go into this “whatever wilderness space is” and do some arm wrestling with the devil. Maybe he doesn’t really want to, but Father God (like a little kid or something) makes him go. (finger-pointing-learn-your-lesson-kinda-thing)

-There are several problems with this interpretation, I think, one of which puts the idea of “wilderness” as the “devils place”. Many people think this: the wilderness is where the devil lives. On the surface, maybe people can pick this up from this gospel story.

-But let me stick my interpretive neck out there and say this: I think this story is far more about Jesus and wilderness than it is about the devil. *Diablo*, what we translate as “devil”, means “temptor”, “slanderer”, or one bible dictionary even says “back-biter”. Diablo is not the outrageous horn-headed, pitch forked, outwardly evil force that social media sometimes makes it out to be. Instead, I see the devil as the temptation that can

quietly tip us into doing great evil. Thus, this story is not about Jesus arm-wrestling evil in the wilderness, but responding to temptation in the wilderness. He is led by the Holy Spirit, no less, to respond to temptation.

-Here's the other interesting question: do these temptations represent only Jesus' temptations, or do they represent the temptations of the people of Israel, do they represent OUR temptations? Consuming food and goods in excess, domineering power, testing and pretending that you are God. These things are overtly human temptations that all of us, perhaps, face in different ways. This isn't just about Jesus being tempted, this is about US being tempted too.

-So why would Jesus be LED into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted? How does that make any sense?

-Maybe we need wilderness in order to face and understand our temptations. Maybe without wilderness, temptations would hide from us and just become a part of "regular life".

-There was a story I remember reading about a while ago in the Minneapolis newspaper. There was a man who won the Minnesota lottery and at the time (most likely 20 years or more ago) it was one of the biggest lottery awards the state had ever given. He was, as I recall, a middle-aged man in his 50's, never married, and a little bit of a shy social person. He bought the winning ticket, like he bought all of his tickets, at his local gas station once a week. Usually the way most state lotteries work, is you walk in, show your winning ticket, and then you come back a few days later for your big check and a press conference about "what you are going to do with all this money". This gentleman walked into the lottery office, confirmed he had the winning ticket and when they asked what date the following week he would want to come in and give his press conference, he said: "Well, I don't know. I need to go up to my cabin and think about this. I'll let you know when I get back." So the man went up to his lake cabin and it was one week, then two weeks, then three weeks and no one had heard from him. Finally, about one month later, he calls the office and says: I'm enroute from the lake and I can swing by and pick up my check this afternoon. Usually these things are planned in advance, but they are able to get a "big check", and some tv cameras together for presentation. When the man shows up, he is wearing big boots, a flannel shirt, beard, and looked like he had just been hunting for weeks straight. They present him the check and then the news stations ask him the first question which is: what are you going to do with the money? He stands there for a second, bends down to the mic and says: "I'm going to write out 3 checks: 1) to my parents because they have no savings for aging and health care, 2) to the local VFW because it does good work for veterans like me, and 3) my church. The interviewer, I'm sure, was stunned and asked: so you are not going to keep any of it? The man paused: "Well, originally I was. But, after being at my cabin I suddenly realized that what I have around me is enough. The woods and the lake, what else do

you need?" "Did you talk with anyone about this decision?", someone asked. "No," the man said. "All I had to do was clear my mind."

- "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." Maybe being in the wilderness shouldn't be seen as such a bad thing after all. Maybe being in the wilderness is, after all, what we need more of not less of.

- Wilderness can give us "clearing of the mind." Wilderness can give us perspective on who we are and who's we are. This, and the end of the day, I think is why Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit to go there: he was led there in order for him to go DEEPER into the world, not remove himself from the world. The same can be true of us today.

- Are you being called by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness? Maybe the Lent church season is a wilderness for you or maybe there is a whole host of other reasons why you feel drawn into the wilderness. Whatever it is, know that wilderness is a gift, not a curse. Wilderness helps us be fully human and fully centered in the world. Grace and peace in your journey as you encounter wilderness in it's many faucets throughout life. Amen.