

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 6, 2009

Genesis 21:8-21; Mark 1:9-15

Wilderness Times

I hope that you noticed the readings that I chose for this Sunday have a wilderness theme. In the difficult Genesis passage Hagar the slave wife of Abraham is compelled to go with her son, Ishmael into wilderness exile. She is given only token food and water that will not sustain her life or that of her son. When that water is gone, she gives up in despair, places Ishmael under a bush and moves away from him, not wanting to see him die. Divine intervention saves them and he lives to become the patriarch of a great tribe.

Mark's gospel account of Jesus' baptism and journey into the wilderness is less emphasized than the other gospels and has a different sense. Like Hagar, Jesus is compelled to go into the wilderness where he suffers hunger, thirst and deprivation. With words that are reminiscent of the Book of Job, Mark describes Satan testing Jesus. And with words that are reminiscent of Isaiah's messianic description of a child:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.(Is. 11:6)

Mark places Jesus in peaceful familiarity with wild animals. Finally, reminiscent of the story of Elijah in the wilderness being provided with food and water by angels that he might have strength for his own wilderness journey, Mark writes that angels come and minister to Jesus.

These two descriptions of wilderness experiences are similar and yet different. The child, Ishmael is saved by God to go on and become a mighty leader. The description that Mark uses

of Jesus in the wilderness could be construed as that of a return to childhood. He plays with the wild animals, is educated through the time of testing and is nurtured by angels. When he returns it is as though he is newly grown into God's adult son. For Hager and Ishmael, the wilderness is a place of tamed terror. For Jesus of Nazareth, it is a time of growth into wisdom and understanding. For we who are the hearers, the readers and the inheritors of these stories, the wilderness is a profound and compelling mystery that touches our lives.

I have seen the wilderness in the Middle East lands of the Bible, but the wilderness is more than a geographical location. It is also a state of being that is, I believe, as much a part of human life as eating, sleeping and breathing. No one person, no family, no community, no ethnic group or nation is immune to wilderness experiences, those times when life is complicated, painful or grief-filled.

How do you understand wilderness? How have you experienced it in your life?

There are times when wilderness is a place of indecision. Caught up in fear of making the wrong choice, one becomes lost in a pathless desert, consumed by that indecision. There are times when the wilderness is a place of "*should have, could have, if only or why didn't I.*" These are wilderness moments of regret for things said or done that hurt another or caused harm. In the wilderness is the dwelling place built with all those 'if onlys' into which one resides in windowless darkness, fearful of confronting those demons; fearful of the pain of that precedes the healing. Fearful of finding the latch that opens the door to freedom and peace.

We can all become lost in a wilderness of self criticism or disappointment that we have not lived up to what we know is our better self. In those wilderness times we struggle with demons of self loathing, regret and depression. At other times the wilderness is a place of helpless fear and pain. My brother's story is of such a wilderness. From the time he was a

teenager, my younger brother resided in a secret wilderness that kept him living a shadow life. He knew that he was different from his friends and finally realized that he was Gay. Because of pressure to conform to the expectations of our parents, I suppose, he denied who he was, married and had two children. When my parents had both died, my brother opened his closet and came out. He loves his children and is a wonderful father but if he had not been forced by life into his wilderness, he would have been his real self for all those missing years. Today he and his ex-wife share equally in the lives of their children and he and his partner will be coming to Massachusetts to be married in August. His wilderness is behind him. How many others are still unable to find their way out?

Wilderness experiences are not only individual moments of dis-ease. There are times when a community or even a nation struggles in an imposed wilderness. The assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and of Martin Luther King, Jr. were such times. 9-11, Iraq, Katrina all sent us into community wilderness journeys of grief, anger, second guessing and confusion.

Right now we are all in the wilderness imposed on our families, our communities and our world through financial recession and fear of the unknown. Stores and restaurants are suddenly closed, layoffs are announced, planned retirements are delayed, homes are not selling, annuities are shrinking. Those things of daily life that we took for granted, are no longer so available. In this time of wilderness uncertainty, the landscape of our lives is changing and we can only hope that a roadmap through the changing wilderness will become available.

As with my brother, the great danger we all face is becoming lost in the wilderness; of allowing fear, doubt, anger or grief to have such a hold that we die of thirst. But there is hope. In both of the scripture passages, life giving nourishment is provided. When all hope is gone, God gives Hagar the sight of a well from which she draws saving water. When Jesus is being

tested, perhaps those wild animals protect him and when he is weak from hunger angels bring him sustenance. That life giving nourishment in the wilderness comes to us in unexpected and surprising ways. The bush that provides shade from the hot sun could be a word of care that lightens a grief-filled heart. The wild animals might be insistent voices warning us back from chasms of hopelessness. The ministering angels may be those who have been through the same experience. They guide and direct our progress until we also can find our own way into safety.

There are two things that we need to know about wilderness times. The first is that despite the individual nature of some wilderness experiences, no one is meant to be alone in the wilderness. We are responsible for one another both in the giving and in the receiving of love and care. In our wilderness times, the most important word we can say to another is “Help.” Why is it so hard to speak that one word? Even if it takes the last vestige of our courage or our final breath of air, we can give another person the profound gift of being asked to help. Why do we hold back on that gift? Pride? Fear of rejection? Not wanting to bother the other? Privacy? Who knows? God knows. And God is always with us in our pain-filled times. When we have no ability to cry out our help to others, we have God who knows each of us intimately and who walks with us through our hard times. Still, God passionately desires that we be in community with one another sharing love and care. When we ask for help, we are allowing God to work through another’s voice, hands, compassion and care. Could any of us turn away when asked for help? I find that hard to believe. And don’t you feel honored to be asked for advice or support? I certainly do. In our own pain, can we find the ability to gift another with that same honor?

The second thing that we need to know is that we cannot grow without wilderness times. If she had not been exiled into the wilderness, the slave Hagar would not have found her freedom. If her son had not been exiled, he would not have become a mighty leader. Jesus

needed to find himself, define his mission and become comfortable in his power. He needed the wilderness to grow into his Divine mandate; the simple carpenter become Messiah.

In her book, My Grandfather's Blessings, Rachel Naomi Remen describes a vivid dream that she had. She writes,

“I saw a daffodil bulb planted in the earth.
Lying on top of it was a large and very heavy rock.
Because of the rock, the daffodil was unable to bloom.
... The rock was saying, ‘It’s a dangerous world. Don’t bloom.
I will keep you safe’. ... The bulb answered, ‘I need to bloom.
Blooming is my whole purpose for being alive.’”¹

In the wilderness, we learn who we are and who we can be. We struggle with all the pain, confusion and fear and in the struggle find insights not only about our own depths but also about compassion for others. We grow in wisdom and become refined in the fires of the desert sun.

We need the wilderness if only to learn how to argue with rocks. When we emerge from those wilderness times, our spirits have bloomed and our lives are richer for the experience. But only if we let it be so. No one chooses the wilderness but we do choose to learn and grow or to wither and die. May we grow and become strong in faith, hope and love. Amen.

¹ Remen, Rachel Naomi, My Grandfather's Blessings, p. 133.