



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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## ***“Wilderness Faith”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Exodus 16: 1-12; John 6: 22-35*

*May 3, 2020*

As many of you know, I’ve been hosting a daily devotional on Facebook over the course of the last month and a half. Each weekday, at noon, I log into Facebook Live and spend 10 minutes or so reflecting on Scripture and faith in our lives today. We’ve called it ‘Profiles in Faith,’ because the framework of our reflections has been that of looking at one character or another and the manner in which their journey with God informs ours. Over the past weeks we worked our way through the Old Testament, then the birth narrative and then, this past Monday, our focus centered on John the Baptist.

I turned to the opening words of the Gospel of Mark, which shares the story of John the Baptist calling the people out into the wilderness to hear the word of God – and immediately I was overtaken by the setting of the scene. Even Monday, I told the listeners that we would end up coming back around to those topics for today. It was a concept that grabbed onto me and wouldn’t let go – and it was one that has continued to echo in my heart throughout the course of this week. The very notion of being called out into the wilderness to hear the word of God was something that I couldn’t shake – and for one very clear reason. We are there!

My friends – we’re in the wilderness! We’ve been yanked away from the normalcy and familiarity of our daily living. We’ve been pulled aside from the typical distractions and entrapments that our lives thrust upon us. Our hearts and minds have been freed from their incessant focus on the hyper-calendared rat race that is our day-to-day, and we are in the wilderness. Scared...Sometimes a bit lost...Not entirely sure what is next...We are in the wilderness, fearing and fretting, concerned and confused, wandering and wondering what comes next... I could go on and on, but the reality is that, in a myriad of ways, we are in the wilderness today. The thing about the wilderness, however, is that it is one of those places that can truly leave you crying out for God!

The Israelites butted heads with that experience again and again on their journey. That story Julie read from Exodus 16 was one that repeated itself a number of times in the wilderness journey of the Israelites.

- A few chapters earlier in Exodus, chased out of Egypt, the army behind them and the Red Sea in front of them – the Israelites cried out that Moses should have left them in Egypt instead of leading them to die at the hands of Egyptian army. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt,” they cried, “that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”
- A chapter after this story in Exodus, facing thirst, the Israelites cry out again. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”
- And in the passage Julie read, it is about food. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt...for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Again and again, the story recurred. Wandering, struggling, sometimes suffering in the wilderness, the Israelites would grow weary, they'd grow impatient, they'd cry out for God, they'd cry out for resolution, in one case they'd even melt all they're gold and try to make a solution of their own, but the story was always the same. They'd find themselves at the heart of the angst of the wilderness, they'd find themselves wondering where, indeed, God was in the face of their strife, and they'd find themselves running up against that moment in which they were crying out in anguish thinking that any other option would be better than the wilderness journey they were in!

But here's the thing. Every time they cried out...every time they fretted...every time they struggled on their wilderness journey – God would meet them! Right there, right then, in the desolate wilderness, God would meet them in new, profound, and unimaginable ways.

- They cried out for salvation from a pursuing army. God parted the seas.
- They cried out in thirst. Water flowed from a rock.
- They anguished in hunger. Manna rained down from the heavens.

More and more, as I considered this notion of the wilderness, my mind was entranced by the fundamental truth that, in times Old Testament and New, it was in the wilderness that people would cry out to God with profound anguish. And yet, it was in the wilderness that people would discover God in new and often unimaginable ways. Remember...

- It was in the wilderness that Jacob wrestled with God.
- It was in the wilderness that the Israelites cried out in need.
- It was in the wilderness that the Israelites formed the golden calf.
- It was in the wilderness, at that same Jordan River in which John baptized Jesus, that the Israelites once again encountered impassable waters at the brink of the Promised Land.
- And immediately after that baptism of Jesus, it was into the wilderness that Jesus was sent to be tempted.

And yet...

- It was in the wilderness that Jacob received the blessing of God at Peniel.
- It was in the wilderness that the water spewed from the rock, the manna rained from the heavens, and the sea parted.
- It was in the wilderness that Moses received the Ten Commandments.
- It was in the wilderness that that Jordan River was parted for safe passage.
- And it was in the wilderness that the angels waited on Jesus as he was tempted.

Again and again, throughout the history of the people of God, the wilderness was a place in which people cried out in anguish for God, and yet where people discovered God in new and remarkable ways. And, my friends, we are there! We are in the wilderness. We've been yanked away from the normalcy and familiarity of our daily living. We've been pulled aside from the typical distractions and entrapments that our lives thrust upon us. Our hearts and minds have been freed from their incessant focus on the hyper-calendared rat race that is our day-to-day, and we are in the wilderness. Scared...Sometimes a bit lost...Not entirely sure what is next...We are in the wilderness, fearing and fretting, concerned and confused, wandering and wondering what comes next, and all of that can leave us crying out for God!

But, in the midst of that wilderness, we come to the table. We receive the invitation of God's grace and mercy awaiting us in these elements. We receive the cup and the bread – reminders of the gift of love that was given to us in Christ. And we do so reminded of those words of Jesus in the Gospel according to John. "I am the bread of life." Jesus proclaims. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

What has stood out to me in such remarkable ways, this week, is that two-fold, and almost paradoxical, nature of the Biblical wilderness. The wilderness, in Scripture, was a place of profound angst, separation, worry and fear. It was so often a story of listless wandering and aimless living. And, yet, it was the home to those many blessings we've already explored, not to mention the gift of the Law for God's people, the Ark of the Covenant, and the baptism of Jesus in which the Spirit descended as a dove upon the chosen one of God. Again and again, from one generation to the next, the wilderness was the place in which people cried out for God in profound ways – and yet it was the place in which God was revealed and discovered with unimaginable blessings.

Today – we're in the wilderness. And yes, in many ways we know that discord...that strife...that angst that wilderness living can thrust upon us. Some of us more than others...some more fraught and others less...but we are all, in our own ways, in that wilderness right now, and we are coming to this table, to this invitation from God, to this gift of grace and love, to receive the bread and the cup that can leave us to never hunger nor thirst again. This is the gift that God brings to us in the wilderness – that there is no cry, no longing, no pain, no strife, no hurt, no anything that God doesn't meet in our wilderness! We may have our moments of crying out – but every cry of the wilderness was answered in the love of God. Today, tomorrow, always – that story doesn't change. And today, tomorrow, always – the root of that everlasting promise rests in the very gift that we are about to receive.

We are in the wilderness, and we may have our moments of crying out. But, this table reminds us that today, tomorrow, always, God is here – and that there is no cry, no longing, no pain, no strife, no hurt, no anything that God doesn't meet in our wilderness! So, open your hearts as we come to this table. Receive these gifts that remind us that God meets us in our wilderness that we may never hunger nor thirst again. And, go forth rejoicing in the wilderness faith that is ours!