

Sermon: September 24, 2023

Message

The wilderness can be a frightening and dangerous place. Off the beaten path, it is beyond the reach of government protection or community support. The early Israelites stumbled through the wilderness for 40 years... hungry and thirsty, frightened and alone, they faced powerful temptations to turn away from the God who rescued them from slavery. "At least in Egypt, we had meat!" they declared as they shook their fists at Moses... and at God.

The wilderness comes in many ways. Sometimes it is a desolate desert. The heat pounds down on us, mirages of water tempt us to go in the wrong direction. Sometimes it is a dark place, filled with shadows. Those shadows reach out, covering the light. Unseen dangers lurk hidden from sight, but never hidden from our imaginations.

Jesus faced his greatest temptations in the wilderness before his ministry ever began. The disciples were deserted in the wilderness as they sat in a small locked room, in fear for their lives and grieving for their beloved leader. For Paul, the wilderness is a tiny prison cell in the heart of the Roman Empire.

The wilderness is the place where we face our fears.

Part of what makes the wilderness so frightening is that we have to face it alone. No matter what it looks like, in the wilderness, we are cut off from our community: no one to cheer us on; no one to hold us when we are scared; no one to reach out and touch our hand. In the wilderness, we are truly alone.

We all face the wilderness sometime in our lives... and many of us return to the wilderness over and over again. The wilderness can be dirty city streets, with threats of violence around every corner. The wilderness can be found in war zones, surrounded by enemy fire or in a small town blown away by tornados.

The wilderness can take the form of addiction, domestic violence, financial problems, bullies... the wilderness can be found anywhere - even in our homes. When we enter the wilderness, we face hidden fears that can strike us anywhere.

As Paul wrote the letter we heard today, he sat in a prison cell. He didn't know if he would live or die there... he didn't know if he would ever worship again with the Philippian community that loved him so much. But he didn't shake his hand at God in anger like the early Israelites did in the wilderness... he didn't lose faith in the midst of suffering. No, Paul responds with thanksgiving and faith... and joy.

And then he turned his attention outward and prayed for those he loved... for those who God loves... for all those in need of a glimpse of God's loving presence.

Even in his darkest wilderness, Paul prayed for us. And now, whether we are in the greenest pastures or darkest valleys, we should follow his example... we should still pray every day that each of us have faith to sustain us in the wilderness – whatever that wilderness may look like

Because Paul learned something important in that prison cell:

- No matter how difficult things are, no matter how alone he feels – he is never truly alone.

As Paul sits alone, he hears that there is a enormous community of faith praying for him. All those little churches that he planted along the way – people in Philippi, Rome, Thessalonica, and Corinth were all lifting him up in prayer. And those prayers connected him back to those communities that he loved so much. And they connected him back to God.

Thursday was the International day of Peace and today we honor it. We pray for all those people around the world who are stranded in the wilderness. We join with communities of faith all around the world who lift up the poor and the powerless; the imprisoned and the oppressed. And what better time is there than today to stand up for justice and peace? The news continues to be filled with stories of violence – threats of war in faraway lands and violence in American city streets. And the countless people who quietly face their fears far away from cameras and reporters. Today is the perfect day to pray for peace, because we all need it so much!

- ♥ We pray for the people of Ukraine as they enter another year of war, and for all the people enduring war and devastation in their homes and communities.

- ♥ We pray for the hostages still held in places like Iran, Russia, Syria and Rwanda.
- ♥ We pray for the innocent civilians who die as bombs rain down on their tiny villages.
- ♥ We pray for the teenager that a friend of mine counseled who was hospitalized after her third suicide attempt: "It's never easy to see so much pain in the eyes of a child," she said.
- ♥ We pray for the little girl who whispered in her teacher's ear that her family was living in a domestic violence shelter because "my father is so mean sometimes."
- ♥ We pray for the names written on your hearts and we pray for the names written on my heart... and we pray for the names written on the hearts of everyone out there too.

We pray because Jesus Christ lived for us, suffered for us, died for us, and rose for us. We pray because Jesus sent us the Spirit to speak for us and to lift us up when we find ourselves stranded in the wilderness too. We pray and it reconnects us to the people who love us so much. We pray because it reconnects us back to God too.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid..." Jesus words to the disciples as he faced his own suffering and death come to us today too. No matter how difficult life can be... no matter how vast the wilderness... the peace of Christ will sustain us through the Spirit.

So, my friends, may you go in peace.