



“WELCOMING WILDERNESS”
SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7; MATTHEW 4:1-11
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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The Peace of Wild Things, Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

One person's wilderness is another person's Garden of Eden.

Both places of temptation, both places of mysterious wisdom, both places where we learn what we are made of and are reminded of our place in the scheme of things.

Wilderness can restore harmony and generate dissonance. Welcoming it may come easy or be hard won—either way, the wilderness teaches us what it will.

Utah's canyon lands look like the moon.

Enormous rocks stacked by the ages teetering and standing guard as if giants once played with the terrain.

The landscape seems otherworldly—even as it calls us human beings to a primal groundedness.

Camping there was an adventure my friend Tara and I carefully planned and eagerly anticipated for months.

We drove there from New Mexico to arrive at first light of the morning. We stopped at the ranger station for maps and to tell them where we would be camping in the backcountry—and what day we planned on coming out.

We strapped on our backpacks and began our walk into the wilderness. It was a beautiful day—bright sun and the oranges and browns of the rocks invited us to keep walking—past where we had told the ranger we would set up camp.

We were young and perhaps foolish—but most of all, we were in awe of this rugged place. So, we kept going, following trails marked by stacked rocks, and eventually we found a beautiful place to pitch our tent.

It felt good to set up camp, to prepare ourselves a meal under the stars, and to listen to the night sounds of this ethereal place.

It was a good day.

The sound of thunder in the canyon lands rattles your bones—the sound vibrated the ground and bounced from the rocks—reverberating for what seemed like minutes at a time. We slept very little while we listened to the unexpected storm. The rain sounded heavy and strange.

This is before cell phones or GPS or weather apps. So, we just listened and waited.

And morning ushered us into what would be days of disorientation and determination. That epic storm had been snow, not rain, and the intricacy of the canyon landscape was now a total white out. We could not see anything—no trails, no markers, no horizon to give us our bearings.

We weren't getting out of there any time soon and no one was getting to us either.

Our welcome to the wilderness became a harsh initiation into wilderness wisdom. Our first decision was not to overstep our bounds—we needed to stay put and wait for some kind of clearing—either in the sky or in snow melt. We took an inventory of our food, we passed the time seeing how many songs to sitcoms we could remember. We talked about our lives and our unknown futures. We talked about what kept us going and what tempted us to give up. And we waited.

After a couple of days, the landscape began to reappear. Most of the trails were still covered, so we made the decision to follow a map to try and try to get to a jeep trail about 3 miles away. After we made it to the jeep trail, we estimated we had 3 hours of daylight to walk what was probably 6 more miles to get to our car. The jeep trail ran out. The map we had was wrong. We tried backtracking and looking for a different trail.

It was getting dark. We needed to find a place to sleep. We hadn't seen any people for days. Out of nowhere, a man's voice spoke to us from the shadows.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Devil's Kitchen," he said.

Not exactly the sound of the promised land! But he turned out to be one half of a wonderful couple who had just hiked in that day. They estimated we were about 3 miles from our car.

We were wet and cold and exhausted. The night was freezing. The next day's hike out of there was up the canyon—a very difficult hike. The athlete in me took over. We were not going to stop until we got out of there.

Eventually we found our way out of the wilderness. Sobered, humbled, and newly aware of both our fragility and of our ability to survive. Our time in the wilderness had been a brush with something Holy.

Somehow in our deprivation, there was also an abundance of grace. Provisions came from unexpected places. And we experienced something so very true and so very complicated that both of us, young women in our early twenties, finding our way in life, needed to remember about ourselves.

We are at once vulnerable and strong.

The Garden of Eden was God's dwelling place—a place of abundance, plenty, beauty, harmony. God was close, moving in and among the lushness of a place in which God's creation was as one.

The story of Adam and Eve and the tree of life was an ancient container of meaning for early Mediterranean culture. And a sacred artifact for us to gaze at with our own questions about who we are and why the world is as it is.

It is an oral portrait of vivid contours about why human beings seem so often to live with a distorted sense of ourselves and of God.

There are many ways to read this story—it can be a story about disobedience, it can be a story about temptation, it can be a story about good and evil—it is a complicated story with all of those elements there for the picking. This is also a story about lost innocence—coming of age in a complicated and cruel world.

Eve and Adam learned not how to be like God when they ate from the tree of knowledge, they poignantly became aware of their distance from God—they began to perceive themselves as vulnerable in a way that they had not realized before. They felt their exposure in a way that changed everything for them.

No longer in harmony with the abundance of Eden, no longer at one with the creation, no longer oblivious to the complex nature of things, they could abide there

in Eden no longer and the dissonance of life in this world took on an ominous possibility.

Human beings can act self-destructively. Human beings can distort our role, our place. Human beings can mistake ourselves for God. We can lose track of our created nature, of our place in the family of things.

And we cut ourselves off from each other in a twisted attempt to grab for blessings we are afraid are scarce.

This poetry of our beginnings speaks to us of our susceptibility to suffering and to self-harm, and of how hard it is for us to trust God's abundance.

Jesus willingly follows the Spirit's lead into the desert for a forty day fast—echoing Moses' forty days in the wilderness and Israel's forty years in exile.

After forty days he is tempted to forget who God is and who he is. After forty days he is confronted with the seductive delusions of power and grasping and not trusting God to be God.

Jesus does not grasp. Jesus does not try to bypass the inevitabilities of what human life looks and feels like.

Jesus sought no short cuts through the trials of the wilderness. He was present in each step with just what we need for the wilderness to be a faith-making journey, and not a faith-breaking catastrophe.

Jesus wasn't afraid to be deprived. And he trusted God's abundance even in a barren place.

How have you welcomed wilderness in your life? How do you find your way in the rugged places? What scares you the most about deprivation? What scares you the most about our human habit of grasping at things when we should trust we will have exactly what we need?

We have a rugged road ahead of us Grace Covenant—we live in a wilderness time—we are faced with big questions about how to be faithful in today's world.

The Session's unanimous vote on Tuesday night to engage the congregation in a process of discernment and discovery about the Sanctuary movement is an invitation to search our collective soul about how this church wants to move through this wilderness time in our country.

Sanctuary has traditionally meant providing a safe haven for those facing deportation. The movement in NC is expanding this understanding of sanctuary to consider how communities of faith can cultivate a “culture of sanctuary” that gives all marginalized communities trustworthy sources of support and solidarity when their rights and their human dignity are violated.

Sanctuary can be a way for people of faith to actively share the burdens of oppression that communities of color have had to disproportionately bear for a long, long time.

Indeed such questions, such discernment takes us out of the comfortable distance that we tell ourselves we have from such vulnerability.

How are we being tempted to avoid the wilderness, to avoid the difficult questions? Where are we looking for short cuts? Where do we doubt that we have the energy to keep moving through the wilderness, even after a wrong turn or a faulty map, or an unexpected storm moves in?

Our Lenten journey together is a good time to practice what it feels like to trust God to lead the way. We may be tempted to take a more familiar path—a path where we feel in charge, where we feel more comfortable. And it is true, that we aren’t sure where we are going or what the answers to all of our questions might be. The path ahead is unknown and hard to see.

Wilderness is where faith finds its source and its course. And so, the invitation is not for us to have all the answers, but to welcome the chance to move through this rugged place together.

Jesus walks alongside us as we make our way, as we wonder what direction to take, as we wonder if we can find the strength to take another step.

He shows us again and again how to trust the mighty and startling ways that God is moving in the wilderness.

*When despair for the world grows in us
and we wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what our life and our children's lives may be...
come into the peace of wild things*

Indeed, come into the wisdom of the wilderness that teaches us again of our vulnerability and our strength.

Thanks be to God.