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Wilderness Preparations: A Sermon in the Time of Corona

I'll confess that I've struggled for the past few days to figure out what I might say this week. I've wondered what it is you – everybody – most needs to hear right now. I've spoken to a number of you, and it seems that for most everyone the initial shock of our new social reality has subsided. For the most part, we've settled in to a new routine, and while it's not comfortable, we've found ways to make it work. Many of us still feel a deep sense of apprehension about what may come, while others among us are chafing at our inability to predict our lives right now. Some parents of younger children, I know, are tearing their hair out, trying to be home school teachers while also meeting the demands of a job. I also know that some among us are scared to death not of the virus but of the economy, and are most worried about how to pay the bills. There's so much that's pressing in on all of us right now, and it's hard to know just what needs to be said.

And so I want to do two things. I want to offer a small word of encouragement, and then I want to frame our own experience of isolation by using the story of Jesus in the wilderness, including the temptations that he undergoes in the desert. But first, a small word of encouragement.

What you're doing right now – what we're all doing right now – is hard. And given everything, from all I can tell, you're getting through this with calm and with grace, even under tremendous pressure. I know it's not easy, and I know there are probably some frayed emotions. I know that privately, some of us have showed the strains, becoming more irritable, or less patient. I've felt those things too. But if you can, give yourself some grace. Treat yourself gently. What we're going through is hard, and given everything, I think you're doing incredibly well. We'll have to keep doing it for a while, I suspect, which might not feel encouraging, but hear me say to you right now that, given everything we're up against, I think you're doing splendidly. Even if you don't feel that way yourself, just know that there's someone out here who admires you, who recognizes what you're going through, and who thinks the world of you. I think you're doing great.

But it's not only me saying that. It's a message that comes through some of our most sacred stories as well. So many of the biblical stories were written in conditions not wholly unlike what we're going through, and they speak to what it is to navigate uncertain times. Now is a good time to revisit some of those stories, because I think they're meant to help in times of trouble. They offer words of understanding and encouragement that we can all use right now. Last week, I spoke about the story of Jesus walking on the water, and of how he invited Peter to join him on the waves. Water is always deeply symbolic in the Bible, and in that story it represents chaos, and the ability to walk through chaos, when the stable foundations beneath our feet give way. It helps us to understand that if we can maintain our vision, if we can continue to trust in the One who calls to us, we do have the power to ride the waves of our circumstances without sinking, and without drowning.

This week I'd have us consider another well known story, one that has a particular resonance for our moment. It's the story of Jesus in the wilderness, an episode we often use to frame the season of Lent. While Jesus is in the wilderness, he's tempted by the devil in three very specific ways, all of which speak to struggles we're confronting right now. He's tempted by the illusion of material comfort. He's tempted by the illusion of control. And he's tempted by the illusion of exceptionalism, the notion that while certain realities apply to others, they need not apply to him. In each case, Jesus says no to something, but in saying no, he says yes to something else, broad affirmations that can inform our living in these days. Reading the story of Jesus in the wilderness can offer us some powerful clues about how to respond to this crisis with our humanity not only intact, but maybe stronger than it was previously. But first, let me say a few quick words about the wilderness itself.

The first thing to say is that the wilderness is temporary. It doesn't last forever. Not for the Hebrews wandering in the desert, nor for Jesus at the beginning of his public life. So it shall be with us. While I suspect it will last longer than forty days, and while I'm nearly certain that, contrary to the predictions of some, it will last quite a bit longer than Easter, it will end. If we can keep that at the forefront of our minds, we'll have gone a long way toward enduring whatever it is we shall have to endure. No matter how time may become elongated in the wilderness, stretching ahead unforeseeably, it is temporary.

But here's another thing that's true about the wilderness. Not only is it temporary – it's preparatory. The wilderness moment is a training ground where certain skills and insights can be sharpened. The law emerges when the Hebrews wander in the wilderness. The character of Jesus is forged in the wilderness. It's true of most all of the wisdom literature available to us: Mohammed receives his revelation in the desert, Buddha receives his insight under the Bo tree – a wilderness by another name. To cite a more contemporary example, even Luke Skywalker has to go to Dagobah, a wilderness planet, to become a Jedi. We're not going through this in order to become Jedis, but hopefully we're using it to grow. Because the wilderness is preparatory for a wider story that will still waiting to unfold. It stands at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry – it's not the whole content of it. If we but let it, the wilderness can be a preparatory moment for us as well, a temporary pause allowing us to reflect on what and who we would like to be in the future. Do we wish to continue on as before, in the grip of divisiveness and fear, in a pattern of unsustainable consumption, or do we begin to imagine new ways of being human together – cooperatively, as co-creators of a new future? Used wisely, the wilderness is a preparatory moment for the story yet to come.

Which brings us to the temptations. They each represent moments of discernment about how to conduct ourselves in such a way that our humanity is enhanced, rather than diminished in the face of a crisis. They each represent what it is to choose the way of vulnerability, rather than clinging to the illusions of self-sufficiency or control or the triumph of the will.

Take the first temptation. The devil appeals to Jesus's hunger, to his need for physical sustenance. "Turn these stones to bread," his tempter says. And what would be wrong with that, for we do need to eat. Not only that, we need other things to support our material existence. But it's in the wilderness that we discover that we need a whole lot more than bread, or shelter, to really live. Yes, the material conditions of our lives are important, but so too are the immaterial conditions of our lives. We need tenderness. We

need friendship. We need touch. We need care. We need people around us who will love us, and encourage us, and support us. We need meaning. We need purpose. We need some kind of connection to that which transcends us. In other words, we have an inner spiritual and emotional life that we too often neglect, a secret garden within our hearts that needs to be tended. It's in the wilderness that we realize that. It's in the wilderness that we come to understand that you can have all the bread you need (and to judge by the empty shelves at the Big Y, many people do have all the bread they need) and still not have what you need to truly live. In other words, this wilderness moment might be a good time to check in on your emotional and spiritual well being, and to discern if you've cultivated the inner resources you need in order to live well. Maybe now is the time to explore what it means to pray. Maybe now is the time to find a connection within the natural world. Maybe now is the time to initiate meaningful conversations with those around you that you love about what you find most valuable in the world, and what you don't. We need more than bread to really live.

The second temptation also speaks to the crisis we're facing. The devil takes Jesus to a high place, and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, saying that they could be his if he so chose. It's a fantasy of control. It's the illusion that one can shape the destiny of the world through the force of one's will, one's ego. Jesus knows better. He's been to the wilderness. It's there that we come to understand how little control we actually have over our own lives. It's there that we come to understand that we're subject to events and occurrences that happen to us, no matter how diligent or careful we might be. For many of us, that's the source of our greatest mental anguish right now. We can't control what will happen in the coming weeks and months. Try as we might, we can't fully control the virus or manage its spread. We can't control the markets, and we can't alter how the economy will affect our lives. We can't fully control our schedules or our future. And we can't control the fate of those we most love. If I were to wager a guess, I would say that our greatest pain right now has to do with our helplessness, and our loss of control.

But perhaps this moment is revealing to us what is always already the case in human life. Perhaps we're learning what those who have undergone illness, or a life altering accident, have had to learn. Perhaps we're learning what those who have undergone a form of political oppression have been required to learn. Perhaps we're being asked to consider what every person who has ever faced the ravages of age has been forced to learn – which is to say, all of us, sooner or later: that there are matters of life and death over which we have no control, no matter the force of our will, no matter the size of our bank account, no matter the length of our resume. But perhaps we're also being asked to understand that there is a grace that comes in accepting one's vulnerability, and a paradoxical strength that emerges when we admit that we are not the masters of our own lives. That's not an excuse to live stupidly, or to behave irresponsibly – it is rather an invitation to embrace our humanity, and to forgive ourselves our lack of control. Jesus did that. The way of grace that he modeled suggests that if we do the same, vast expanses of the world will open that had previously been closed. We are more than a little helpless, more than a little out of control. We always have been. But there's a gentle grace that comes from learning how to yield to it.

The third temptation also speaks to our moment. The devil places Jesus on top of the Temple, and tells him to throw himself down, for he has a special protective status.

As the Son of God, he will no doubt be swept up by the angels. You don't have to believe in the literal existence of angels to fall prey to this temptation. It's one to which those of us in the United States are particularly prone. It's a temptation to which the wealthy, or the privileged, are prone. It's a temptation to which the young and the healthy are prone. The temptation is this: we enjoy a special status that exempts us from conditions that apply to other people. Gravity applies to them, not to me. Health risks, or financial damage, or unfortunate accidents of geography, apply to them, not to me.

The wilderness teaches otherwise, and Jesus knows it. Those who listen well in the wilderness know that their vulnerabilities bind them to other people, rather than distancing them. They know that gravity, to say nothing of biology, applies to everyone, regardless of nationality or social status. They know that there's no such thing as a Chinese virus or an Italian one, an American one or an Iranian one. They know that there is but one human family, regardless of the arbitrary markers we use to categorize ourselves. They know that there are no exceptions, or exemptions. Which, for those who are sensitive to the lessons of the wilderness, ought to have an opening effect. It ought to open us to consider the vulnerabilities of those in the prisons. It ought to open us to the vulnerabilities of those in Gaza. It ought to open us to the vulnerabilities of those in Haiti, or to those without adequate housing. It ought to open us to China, rather than heightening our xenophobia. Gravity applies to us all, and not only now, in the time of a plague. Gravity applies all the time. Listening within the wilderness moves us to embrace that truth, accepting the conditions of our shared humanity.

In Matthew's account of the temptations, there is a detail that Luke doesn't include. When the time of trial is over, the text says that angels came and attended to Jesus. It's a detail I don't want you to miss. You see, the wilderness is never quite as empty as it seems. There are devilish voices that emerge in the wilderness, true, but they're not the only ones. There are also angels, and they attend to our needs. The phone call, the email, the sidewalk messages all up and down Lyme Street with encouraging words, the smile and the hello, the food delivered and the burdens shared. Need I mention the workers stocking shelves at the grocery store? Need I mention the doctors and nurses putting themselves at incredible risk to care for those who are sick. This is the work of the angels. In ways large and small, you're a part of it, and you're doing it splendidly. The wilderness is never as empty as it seems.

I'll close with a poem. It's called "Our Real Work," from Wendell Berry. It speaks to what it is to exist in the wilderness, no matter how temporary that wilderness might be. It speaks to the wilderness as an opening, a possibility, a preparation. It speaks to how we might use our sojourn through isolation.

"It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings."

Love in the Time of Corona. I love you. Given everything, I think you're managing this moment incredibly well. And I hope that, however impeded, you're learning how to sing through this sojourn in the wilderness.