

March 1, 2009
The Congregational Church of Hollis
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WHY WE ARE IN THE WILDERNESS

Mark 1:9-15

I few years ago I was getting ready to attend the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, the successor denomination of the Congregational church, part of this church's heritage, and the denomination where I have my standing as a minister. This General Synod is a national meeting held once every two years. The meeting covers several days and involves thousands of people from around the country. There was a particular celebration that year I was invited to be part of. In preparation for this I was invited to attend a session where all of the activities and events for the week were discussed.

But first the leader asked us each to share some experience where we felt particularly close to God. Mine was a spiritual epiphany that came to me as I was walking a quiet forest path one fall day. Others had similar stories of profound experiences of God they had out sailing or canoeing, hiking a mountain or sitting and looking over a valley below. The experiences were basically the same: a time alone, a time of quiet, and a time of reflection and a time in nature.

When we finished with that discussion, the schedule for the week was laid out. Each day began with Bible study at 6:30 followed by a breakfast meeting followed by speeches followed by seminars followed by lunch meetings followed by other speeches followed by other workshops followed by a supper meeting followed by evening speeches followed by a variety of late night options beginning at 9 PM.

I was going to mention that we had all just talked of our most profound experiences of God being in quiet, alone, unscheduled, unrushed, undistracted from things. It seemed to me that God had effectively been scheduled out of the event. But I never said anything because we got on to a listing of all the other pre-meeting meetings and all the post-meetings meetings and all the pre-planning meetings for the next big meeting in two years. And I bowed my head and silently thanked God I only needed to be part of one session and I could go home.

These are well intended people. They were not deliberately scheduling God out, and maybe some did have a great spiritual epiphany during a discussion

of an amendment to the previous motion to reconsider the motion previous to the previous motion not to reconsider any more motions. But few of us have a great experience of God in the exercise of parliamentary procedure or Robert's Rule of Order, which is why they are of uncertain value in church gatherings. Like Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the wilderness is often where we are best able to wrestle with the temptations of life, where we are least distracted and God most likely to speak to our hearts.

A wilderness is not the same as a desert. It is not just sand and scorching heat and scorpions. It is a place apart; it is a barren place, a place of scarcity. It is not a forest or a farm, a place that is lush and pleasant and fruitful. It is not a city or town bustling with activity.

A wilderness is a lot more like your 401K: sparse, barren, more marked by what is absent than by what is present. It is not lifeless. Life just has a lot of trouble prospering there. In the wilderness we see things differently and face new temptations. The plentiful returns we once took for granted are now uncertain. Bountiful resources become scarce treasures. We are forced to decide what is really important and what is really not that important at all.

In our nation's financial history there are the high points, the record breaking profits, and the glory in the excess where we can lose perspective on what is truly good, what is really important and that gratitude to God is essential in our lives. For Jesus there was the high point where the heavens didn't just open, they were torn apart. This is no simple award show. There is the voice of the Almighty creator of heaven and earth saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Immediately following this is the time in the wilderness, a time of scarcity where there is struggle with the little bit the wilderness provides.

Maybe for you the wilderness has been a place of illness as it has been sometimes for me. Denied some of the health and wellness we have known we begin to appreciate life in a new way, a more sparse way and we learn something of what is truly essential to us. Accidents and illness force us to reconsider how we live and move and have our being.

When I was in my late 40's playing volleyball with men in their early 20's my beloved suggested I rethink how I got exercise because I kept breaking things. My second-to-last volleyball injury came when a spiked ball ricocheted off another player and hit my glasses, cutting my eyelid. It bled so profusely I had to stop, shower and leave. From there I went to the

hospital to visit parishioners where I met a surgeon I knew and told him what happened and asked if I needed a stitch.

He looked me in the eye and told me that it is men like me acting like an adolescent that is driving up the cost of medical insurance. It was the following week when I was again playing volleyball and fell and broke my wrist and I went to the hospital praying to God that I would not run into that doctor.

It was not until I had a serious gall bladder attack five years ago this time and, to the doctor's great dismay, I postponed surgery several weeks until after Easter, that I made changes in my diet and lifestyle that have stayed with me to this day. I have learned that a no-fat diet can be a no-taste diet. It was sparse and difficult but in this barren diet I relearned something of the value and simple joy of healthy food.

No one wants to lose chunks of their retirement savings. No one wants their housing values to plummet. No one wants to get hurt. No one wants to get sick. But sometimes that is the most valuable time. It is when we are in our wilderness. It is then we ask God questions we would not otherwise ask.

It is in the sparseness of the wilderness then we look at our life in ways we would not otherwise. We evaluate our life and lifestyle, we reconsider our diet, and we take a long look at how we exercise. It is when the wimpy New Year's resolutions to change come to firm resolve. That is why God sends us into the wilderness, sometimes for a long time.

There is beauty in the wilderness, but also danger. Fall on a city street and there are passers by to help. Fall on a trail in the deep woods and it is unlikely if anyone will hear your voice. Walk 5 miles on city streets and there are family and friends to call to get a ride home, or buses and cabs to take. Walk 5 miles in a deep wood trail and it is up to you alone to walk the 5 miles back. Walk down any city street and never too far away is a place to get something to eat and drink, places to buy clothes and make phone calls and get a hair cut. In the wilderness these do not exist, but something of their absence helps sort out what is really important.

In the wilderness it is not just that we are tempted with things, but we learn something of their value to us, what is of first importance and what is of passing importance and what we are just as well off without. That is part of what God leads us through when he leads us into the wilderness. If today is always just like yesterday, if there will be no new challenges, no new

difficulties, and no new opportunities then there is little need for the wilderness moment.

But if you think that God has some new challenge, God has some new opportunity, God has some new word, then you need time to prepare. We do not choose to get sick or hurt. People seldom voluntarily give up prosperity. Jesus did not go off into the wilderness on his own volition. He was led there by the Spirit of God. He went from the wet of the Jordan to the arid wilderness to be tested, tried and prepared for the time to come.

I am not sure how to take that passage about wild beasts. I am a city boy and wild beasts make me a little nervous. I remember my first overnight camping trip in Canada. That night I was sure I heard someone getting killed. It turned out to be a loon. There is something about the quiet of a deserted place to magnify the sound and to magnify our fears. It is the place we wrestle with our fears and what frightens us and we grow in awareness of angels that minister to us.

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” In Genesis we read that Cain was warned that, if he did well, fine. But, “Take care; sin is crouching at the door.” Or in the words of a contemporary version, “If you had done the right thing, Cain, you would be smiling. But you did the wrong thing, and now sin is waiting to attack you like a lion. Sin wants to destroy you, but don’t let it! Sin is the wild beast crouching outside the door.” Temptation can tell us of our strength, but the devil is also seeking to exploit our weakness.

Strength has been defined as the ability to break a chocolate bar into four pieces with your bare hands—and then eat just one of the pieces. Some of us have that strength, but the best idea is not even to touch that chocolate bar. And by the way, do not join a health club located next to an ice cream store. Many a sad tale begins with the notion that now that I am sober I can safely go to the tavern with my friends. Remember that sin is crouching at the door. Don’t bargain with temptation; don’t try to stare it down. Don’t show temptation how strong you are – flee from temptation.

An old Indian legend says that many years ago Indian braves would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One young brave hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow. I will test myself against that mountain, he thought.

He put on his buffalo hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders and set off to climb the pinnacle. When he reached the top, he stood on the rim of the world. He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride. Then he heard a rustle at his feet. Looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke. "I am about to die," said the snake. "It is too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."

"No," said the youth. "I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me." "Not so," said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, I will not harm you." The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it down gently. Suddenly the snake coiled, rattled and leaped, biting him on the leg. "But you promised," cried the youth. "You knew what I was when you picked me up," said the snake as it slithered away.

Sin is crouching at the door. Don't bargain with temptation; don't try to stare it down. Don't show temptation how strong you are – flee from temptation. In the wilderness, facing temptation prepared Jesus for the life he was to face so he was strengthened not to be seduced by Satan.

Many of you know that our youngest son completed Air Force basic training in the fall and is now in advanced training. The first day of advanced training these airmen were told to go to the ocean, find 2 twenty-pound rocks, put them on their shoulders and run on the beach. I am sure there is a perfectly good reason they told them go to the ocean, find 2 twenty-pound rocks, and put them on their shoulders and to run on the beach. And do you know why? Neither do I, but it is just part of the test, the trial, to prepare him for whatever is next. It was not of his choosing as our wilderness is not of our choosing but part of the preparation for the next challenge.

It is, to use a metaphor of the moment, like spring training. Josh Becket knows how to pitch. Dustin Pedroia knows how to field. Big Poppy knows how to hit. From childhood they have played the game. Still they need to prepare themselves for the days ahead. They do not just show up in April, sing the National Anthem and play ball. There is preparation for the challenge in front of them. It is one reason every Sunday, year after year, we gather in worship to prepare ourselves for the time to come. It is why we make special preparation during Lent with special services: to prepare ourselves for the time to come.

The test that comes from God is not intended for us to fail, but to strengthen us and prepare us for the challenge ahead. I like the story of a camp counselor questioning a little girl about her faith. Trying to prepare her for the temptations she would surely face back home, the counselor inquired, “What if the devil comes to your door and tries to lead you astray?” The little girl replied, “I’ll ask Jesus to answer the door for me.”

In the New Testament book of Hebrews it tells us that in Jesus “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16) Jesus has been in the wilderness. He has known loss of friends, loss of wealth and loss of health, and he is with us in our desert to be our companion and our strength and our guide to lead us through.

When Jesus left the wilderness he did not leave temptation behind. But he did leave better prepared for what was to face him in the years to come. It was in the wilderness that Jesus struggled days and weeks with temptations. We too face wilderness struggles to test and to confirm our faith. Jesus has been to the wilderness and is with us in our wilderness wanderings. May God’s grace guide us through this sacred season as we prepare our lives to receive and live God’s Word anew.