



"Time in the Wilderness"
Scripture – Mark 1:9-13
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 21, 2021

In her bestselling book, *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard says, "How we spend our days is how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."

My first reaction to her obvious insight was to say, "Well, of course! It's obvious that how we spend our days is how we spend our lives."

Yet, when I linger over those words, they sink into my soul and become unsettling. Our lives race by quickly, yet how we spend this afternoon is how we spend the limited time we have. What we do on Wednesday is what we are doing with the hours of that day.

Have you ever had that feeling that what you are doing currently is just a warm-up for something more significant in the days to come? Have you ever thought: one of these days in the future, I will be more intentional in my living? I will be more thoughtful and more generous. I will be less anxious about things I cannot control and not become upset by things that are of little consequence in the long run. Yes, indeed, sometime in the future I will be more deliberate in what I am doing with the hours I have. I will shed those petty feelings and unseemly habits that prompt others to start backing up from me. I will pursue a more purposeful path. I will live in harmony with the way of Christ. Yes, one of these days I will live the life I am capable of living. Today, what I am doing with this hour or that one doesn't really count, right?

The annual gift of the Lenten journey that culminates in Easter is a time for honest self-reflection. It is a time to scrutinize those aspects of our character that we often stuff into the back of the closet where we won't encounter them.

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary delivers the same story – the temptation of Jesus. Matthew and Luke provide us with far more detail than Mark, but the core of the story is essentially the same: immediately after being baptized, Jesus spent 40 days alone in the wilderness where he was tempted.

Although Mark's story of this decisive moment is short on specifics, he includes a detail worth noting. After Jesus is baptized, he hears a voice that says he is God's beloved son. Then the gospel says, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness."

The detail that catches our eye is that Jesus did not choose to go into a wild, remote and menacing place. He was *driven* into the wilderness. Is not the same true with us? All of us experience patches of life that are dark and unsettling that we did not choose. The current pandemic is an obvious example. A deadly virus alters our lives and the lives of everyone on the planet. We have endured it for nearly a year and we are more than ready for it to end.

There are also other incidents in life that force us into the wilderness: if our marriage breaks up, if our child becomes an addict, if we lose our job, if a pathology report is frightening, and not "if," but when a loved one dies.

God does not will for the wilderness to descend upon us. Bad things simply happen. Sometimes they are caused by poor choices – ours or someone else's. Sometimes it is simply the fact that our bodies are fragile. Sometimes we have no idea why the wilderness crashes in on us, it simply does.

When we find ourselves in a wilderness time, our overriding concern is to discover a way out. It is an uncomfortable and unnerving place to be and we yearn to be liberated from it. The wilderness was for Jesus – and is for us – a liminal space. It is a time of transition; a time of internal struggle when we stand at the threshold between our former self and our soon-to-be self. The wilderness is a space where we begin to shed "ordinary routines and inherited mindsets...and begin to see things differently. It is a place where our world view might be shattered and our existing priorities might be turned upside down (which means it can be frightening. But it can also be exciting because it is) "a springboard into a fresh way of doing things."¹

I doubt that Jesus would have used the word "joy" to describe his time in the lonely and barren place. Yet, it was a valuable time. It shaped him and prepared him for the challenging days ahead.

What have you learned from this pandemic, our wilderness experience? Many of us have learned how to hold meetings on Zoom and visit family on FaceTime, and that we really can survive without going to restaurants and concerts and sporting events. But, what have you learned about yourself? Have you rearranged any of your priorities? Have you found ways to draw closer to God?

I suspect many of us have learned not to take for granted opportunities to spend time with loved ones and friends. Love is what life is about and masks and social distancing are barriers to close relationships.

Many of us have learned that time in the wilderness moves like cold molasses. I imagine that the 40 days Jesus spent in the threatening environment without food and without a friend seemed interminable. But he developed something that would become invaluable in facing the challenges that would arise during his ministry. He learned how to persevere in the face of hard times.

The late Peter Gomes was a Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard Divinity School. On one occasion, when he was preaching to students who were on the cusp of graduating, Gomes said: "Instead of seducing you with notions of greatness and of your place at the head of the line, perhaps we ought to summon you to ordinariness, because that is where care and attention are needed. We need people who are not waiting for their crescent moment in which to excel and to do a heroic act. Rather, what we need are people who regard their daily life – the routine and the ordinary – as the place where they can do ordinary things extraordinarily well. What is really necessary is something that will get you through when everything that is supposed to work does not; something that will get you through when all else fails. It is this: endurance. Instead of preparing you for 'success,' we should be preparing you to cope with failure when things fall apart... Instead of lifting up the image of the eagle, (we

should be) celebrating the camel. Camels that will make it across the desert because they have what is needed on the inside and they will not quit.”²

Might endurance be one of the lasting lessons many of us will carry beyond the pandemic? Perhaps we will be braver in the face of the unknown and possess the tenacity to persevere come what may. Buddha said, “Do not pray for lighter burdens, but for stronger backs.” Perhaps without realizing it, the hardships of this pandemic and the many months it has continued have developed some new muscles in our backs.

Angie Thomas’ novel *The Hate U Give* is a courageous and heartbreaking story of Starr, a young black person coming of age and the deep questions of identity — questions as to where she belongs in this world, and of life too often lived defined by violence or the threat of violence or the struggle to deal with violence. There is a moment when Starr is in the car with her mother. Out of the blue, her mom says, “You weren’t breathing when you were born.”

“What?” Starr replies.

“I had you when I was 18, still a baby myself. Momma thought there was no way I could be a good parent, but I did everything right. I quit drinking and smoking and made every appointment. I even played Mozart through some headphones I placed on my belly. We see what good that was; you didn’t finish a month of piano lessons.”

“But in that delivery room, when they pulled you out, I waited for you to cry, but you didn’t. Everyone started running around...I freaked out. Your daddy couldn’t calm me down. After the longest minute of my life, you cried. Then, I cried harder than you. (And I could not shake the feeling that) I had done something wrong. (That it was my fault). But a nurse took my hand, looked me in the eye and said: ‘Sometimes you do everything right and things still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right.’”³

Our times in the wilderness can be a struggle to endure. But no matter what happens, we must, with God’s help, never stop doing right.

NOTES

1. Andrew D. Mayes, *Beyond the Edge: Spiritual Transitions for Adventurous Souls*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2013), p.ix.
2. Kimberly L. Clayton, “Grace, Endurance, Hope,” June 16, 2019.
3. Tom Are, Jr., “Worth the Wait,” December 13, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Grace, God of Love — From age to age, you are faithful to us. You, who spoke into the depths of chaos to create us in your image; you, who walked among us to show the fullness of your love ... You never tire of drawing near to us! With gratitude we draw near to you, and entrust our highest hopes and deepest longings to your care.

Holy God, as we begin our journey to the cross, we pause to look inward ... and to look outward. We reflect upon our lives, and confess the sin that infects our hearts and separates us from you. We reflect upon our common life, and confess the brokenness that mars your vision of justice and peace. And we reflect upon the life you offer, and consider the ways we can more fully embrace your way. During this holy season, we return to you, O God ... seeking forgiveness, seeking transformation, seeking wholeness.

Help us let go of the things that keep us from loving you with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and that keep us from loving our neighbors as ourselves. Free us from fears that keep our hearts in a defensive posture; strip us of selfish impulses that privilege our own desires over the community's needs; release us from unrelenting anger that holds our energies hostage, relieve us of unfair expectations that harm others and diminish ourselves. Cultivate space in overcrowded lives for creativity and growth. And nurture within us gifts of compassion, generosity, love, and joy so that – with every breath, every word, every deed – we might glorify you.

We lift before you those who need your tender care — those in pain, those in mourning, those in crisis. Be especially with the people of Texas and other southern states after the chaos of this week. We lament the failures that left too many to endure icy temperatures without heat, without water, and without food. As communities continue to grapple with this crisis, give those who can help generous spirits and compassionate hearts. And in the days ahead, empower all residents of these communities to work together to ensure the welfare of all.

Gracious God — As we embark on this Lenten journey, send your Spirit to accompany us, just as you accompanied Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness. Guide our feet, sustain our spirits, and keep us faithful to the way of Christ.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.