

## Wilderness and Corona

Deuteronomy 8; I Kings 19:1-9

In many ways, having to live with and deal with the coronavirus, is like being in the wilderness. There is danger at each place we go and every interaction we have. It's worse than snakes, scorpions, lack of water, cold nights and hot days because we can see and feel those. And we don't know when and if our physical distancing will end. ***And even when it does – will we be safe?***

When we get lost in the wilderness, our very life can be at stake. When I was in college seven of us went canoeing in the wilderness area north of Duluth, Minnesota. Before we set out, we had to decide what our route was and outline it on a map for the outfitters. This was so they could find us if we were late returning. We were strictly cautioned to not change our course, to avoid bears, to avoid rapids we couldn't handle, to avoid losing our food, and to avoid getting hypothermia. The wilderness is beautiful, but it is dangerous.

That's what the Hebrew people found out. At first they were thrilled to be delivered from slavery in Egypt. But when they got out into the Sinai desert, they complained about being there. They didn't like the change. They wanted certainty in life and comfort and control - just like we do.

But when they got to the Promised Land - they feared entering it. They went with the report of the 10 spies and not Caleb's and Joshua's confidence. So God let them wander 40 years, hoping they would learn wilderness living.

The wilderness is often seen as a place of **testing**. ***Are we tough enough to survive?*** It's one reason some TV shows are popular. This testing idea is a common one in the Bible. ***Will we stay faithful to Almighty God?*** Way too often Israel failed.

We assume that the wilderness means a difficult time of **temptation, trials and discomfort** – physically & especially spiritually. The Bible gives us a variety of stories where people in the wilderness come under a time of intensified temptation and spiritual attack. It can involve a spiritual, financial, or emotional drought.

Having a “wilderness experience” doesn't assume we sin, but ***will we mature, grow and move closer into our Creator's will?***

But notice, it was precisely when the people were leaving the wilderness to enter the Promised Land that God became really worried about them. God says, in effect, "I'm giving you a land flowing with milk, honey, cattle, crops, silver and gold... But I'm worried about what will happen to you when you get all these goodies. I'm afraid you will forget how to trust me. I'm afraid you will become puffed up in your hearts and say to yourselves, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth!'"

So God warned them about the temptation of forgetting him by threatening, "If you ever come to that conclusion, you will surely perish!" And guess what? They lost their kingdom, were conquered by other nations, and taken into exile.

Interestingly enough, a time in the wilderness, is often tied to a **mountaintop event**. Being saved from Pharaoh eventually led to Israel grumbling and making the Golden Calf. That great rescue by the Almighty, ended up in wilderness living.

Others like the prophet Elijah, who had a fantastic courageous confrontation with the priests of Baal, then ran and hid from Queen Jezebel. God had backed him up on Mount Carmel, after he drenched the altar and sacrifice to Lord Yahweh with water and the sacrifice burned up. But then he ran away and hid.

Mountain top experience and then wilderness, full of fear, wanting to die, when God rescued Elijah with food and water. So wilderness stands not just for difficult places but also for **discouraging circumstances as well as our own spiritual outlook**. Psychology as well as geography and theology is involved. ***Where is God*** in this is a very common question.

And we know from Jesus' temptations, the **Devil is in the wilderness**. Urging us to make destructive choices. A number of stories in the Bible show that Satan wants to devour us.

The wilderness is seen as a place of **intense experiences**, stark need for food and water like manna and quails, of isolation, of danger and divine deliverance, of renewal, and encounters with God. I encouraged a friend of mine to go on a retreat and he ran away at the last minute. He was at the retreat, but the first night at bedtime he insisted he had to go home.

Another friend of mine stayed the whole retreat, but at the end was very angry with me and with his Creator. Why? He told me he had met the Almighty. God spoke to him about some personal issues. It was clear. My friend had to listen and change, or he would be in trouble. Thanks be to God that my friend listened.

So the wilderness can be a **place of healing, coming to terms, change and learning**. That's what the Apostle Paul means when he says, "But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was...I went into Arabia." (Galatians 1:15-17)

Wilderness is an opportunity and a time to **get our heads straight as well as our souls and spirits**. Sometimes this period is described as a spiritual retreat into the desert, to work out the implications of an encounter with Jesus. We are not exactly sure what Paul was doing during this time of up to 3 years, but we can assume he was working through what "Jesus as Messiah" means. And he was discerning his role as an evangelist. He probably spent a great deal of time reading scripture, praying, repenting, and reflecting and even thought through what he would say on his missionary journeys. Paul did some serious spiritual discernment as well as did some testing of his ideas with people. He probably spent some time working through what is commonly called, "the dark night of the soul."

So with this quick background about what wilderness is from the Bible, **can we call this time with the coronavirus a wilderness time?** Words translated as "wilderness" occur nearly 300 times in the Bible and offer us a varied and rich context of meanings. A formative Hebrew memory is the 40 years of wandering in the

wilderness, mixing experiences of dryness, wild landscapes, of searching for a promised land, and of encounters with God. ***What are and will politicians, historians, economists, theologians and ecologists writing about what we are going through right now?***

I suspect all of us have had some type of wilderness experience or two during our lives. ***What have we learned from them?*** A successful wilderness time is a search for solitude, for self discovery, for coming to terms with life & with ourselves, dealing with our Creator's love for us and God's expectations. And often it seems, may be crucially, it seems to require time alone, in silence, and in nature. In contrast, it seems we surround ourselves with noise, and avoid being really alone, and give nature a cursory glance.

I suspect that by now, the novelty of social isolation is wearing off. Even out in the country it feels surreal, strange, even bizarre or dream-like. Have you been losing track of the days and time more than normal? Are you already tired of the "new" you are experiencing? ***But could it be that our normal way of living is what's weird?*** Even as farmers how often are we so busy and only occasionally think about the things of God? It's too normal, or is it abnormal to fall into a comfortable kind of drudgery when everything is going fine in a familiar controlled predictable way? Now even for us in rural areas, life feels just a little off.

Brett Fawcett wrote: If the virus has shocked us into a kind of hushed anticipation and sense of heightened danger and alertness, we should remember that this is probably a little closer to how we should be living. (and many around the world are) In fact, this is probably how people in the Bible experienced the world. If you read Scripture, you do not get the impression that they saw a world as a safe or stable place. The threat of destruction and war constantly loomed over the people's heads. The possibility of famine or plague sweeping through the land was always haunting the back of their minds. Even the ground beneath them was liable to break open and swallow them up at any moment." ***Could it***

***be that here in Canada, our new normal is the real normal in some form or another?***

It's always been amazing to me, how thin a line we have between order and chaos. This is political, economic & social. But it's especially spiritual. A little chaos is a good thing. It encourages and allows openness to new ideas and experiments. It provides some freedom of expression and creativity. But too much chaos – is always a threat. However, too much chaos is as much a threat as too little chaos in our lives.

***So how much is our current situation causing each of us to feel chaotic, out of control? Or do we like this current situation for various reasons? How anxious are we to get back to normal? Do we long for the old normal life, or are we taking on the challenges of embracing the opportunities we have today?***

Maybe it's doing that project you have wanted to do for years. Or learning a new skill. Or simply slowing down, doing more reading, thinking and contemplating. Maybe you are spending more time with family – even electronically. And hopefully it's doing more praying & meditating.

Maybe we need to work at being more like Mary and less like Martha. (Luke 10:38-42) Are we keeping ourselves so busy we even now don't find time to listen, reflect & sit at the feet of Jesus?

It's always good to fear wilderness experiences. Sometimes we can't run from them. Sometimes we should run from them. And then there are times we should run to them. But other times, we can't and then we should embrace them. It's hard to talk about wilderness experiences with out mixing in political, social, economic, health and natural disaster events, with our inner spiritual selves.

For example, being unemployed can be a profound, life changing event – with all kinds of chaotic consequences, like spousal abuse, drug abuse, depression, and on and on.

My parents suffered two surprise flash floods, in a very short time period – like a month. They learned what not to do in a flood. But what I remember them talking about most though was that after the first flood, all the neighbors were friendly and helpful to each other. But after the second flood, it was too much to bear. Everyone groused. Two floods was too much chaos. Smiles were replaced by unfriendly grimaces.

***So how can we embrace our current wilderness experience?*** For many of us it doesn't really seem and feel that much different from normal life. In our schedules that may be true. ***But emotionally, is this really true?*** Can we receive and give the same spiritual food and comfort without being together? We can send flowers to a daughter in law far away, who just had a miscarriage, but not being able to visit in the foreseeable future....leaves a lot to be desired.

So even though life may not seem that much different for some, I think on some deeper levels, it might be becoming too much for some people. I think some of the protesting we see around the world about being physically distant, actually has less to do with the need to work, personal rights, in some cases politics and religion, but are really a way to avoid dealing internally with the internal chaos that people are feeling. Denial comes in many forms with many rabbit trails.

Brett Fawcett again: "We don't think of this as our world. We think the ground is firm and solid under our feet. But, as John Buchan (who served as Canada's Governor-General) wrote in his novel *The Power-House*, "You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilization from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Saturn." We live in the same world the Bible portrays; we just fool ourselves into forgetting that fact.

"This may seem stressful. You may be feeling exactly that kind of stress right now. And this is why the Israelites often looked to other kingdoms, which seemed more militarily powerful or technologically advanced, to provide them with a

kind of security. The Book of Isaiah records the Jewish people even turned to Egypt for military support, the very kingdom that had enslaved them and from which God had so powerfully delivered them” (Is 30:1-3, 31:1). They had been warned to not turn their back on Yahweh. This is seen in the Bible as rejecting the Almighty.

Cardinal Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI (16<sup>th</sup>) once asserted that the only goal of the Exodus from Egypt is that of worshiping God according to God’s own specifications: Even the land is promised only so that the people would be free to worship, and the law represents an interior or spiritual land without which the physical land would hold no meaning.

Another theologian points to the development of a relationship between God and his people, the key to which is the development of trust through communication that is facilitated by the solitude and isolation of the desert. So I have to ask: ***How much of our past normal is being afraid of being by ourselves and really meeting God?***

The New Testament offers support for “desert” times and spaces that are abandoned or thinly populated areas. Places Jesus often sought out and the tempter showed up. And the New Testament tends to interpret the Old Testament wilderness experiences as times of grace and closeness to God marked by disobedience. The wilderness seems to have everything to do with our relationship with our Creator. And worship and the law have just as much to do with relationship and building trust between us and Jesus and between each other.

***So are we using this time of wilderness and Covid to strengthen our relationship with Creator God? Can we spend more time focusing on our interior and spiritual landscapes?*** We often don’t know or understand why God allows bad things to happen. But we do know from the wilderness stories of the Bible, what the Almighty hopes occurs within and among his people. Restoration. Repentance. Building trust. Returning to God’s normal.

To close here are two last questions in a sermon with lots of questions – after a mid-week Musing about the importance of questions as well as a prayer of questions: What if God doesn’t want us to return to what we think is normal? What if God is inviting us to a different place? A deeper spiritual promised land?

