

Hiking with Strangers

Psalm 32 (NRSV)

Matthew 4:1-11

March 1, 2020

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Jesus went out from his baptism so excited to follow the Spirit and see where it would lead him. That is how Matthew tells the story. Chapter 3: verses 16-17 directly before this says that Jesus was baptized by John and then he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and then heard “this is my son, with whom I am well pleased.”

So the question is: “Why do we think that times in the wilderness are signs of God’s judging or God’s displeasure?” We do though, don’t we? We think times when we feel alone or feel far from God or feel left out in the wilderness are signs that we have not measured up or acted in good ways.

The truth is that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. The experience of knowing God’s presence can be wonderful and warm and uplifting, and yet it can make the next parts of our lives feel even further from God.

We are now entering Lent – a time when the church seeks to walk in the way of Jesus – even into the wilderness. The time in the wilderness recalls the wanderings of the people of Israel during the Exodus.

It can feel like we are hiking in the wilderness with strangers, because somehow, we do not expect to experience a wilderness at all in our lives of faith. But wilderness can be a part of the faith journey, and often is. Sometimes the wilderness can be in places we don’t expect. And the voice of God can come to us in ways we do not expect. We have a set idea of how we will have a religious or spiritual experience, but that can blind us to God’s presence.

Recently in my daily devotional, Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr introduced me to Steven Charleston, an elder of the Choctaw Nation and a retired Episcopal bishop. His way of knowing God and the Gospel reflect both his Christian and Choctaw heritage and his contemplative practice and love for the earth. He wrote about seeking God’s voice in his personal spiritual experience of these two traditions in his life.

“The irony is I did find what I was looking for, but not in the place I expected. In my romantic imagination, I believed I would find my answer in a religious ritual or ceremony, either Christian or Traditional. I thought the answer might come to me high on a hill doing a vision quest, in the womb-like darkness of a Sweat Lodge, or in a camp meeting out on the prairie. The vision I had from God had been a little like that; it had surprised me during my ritual of morning prayers in Cambridge. But in the end, the answer found

me sitting in a chair. I had been reading the gospel according to Matthew, letting the familiar words of his story slip through my mind like a gentle stream, when suddenly the holy voice I had first heard on the rooftop returned and shook me awake in my spirit. [2]

“You have just read the first vision quest of Jesus.”

I smile now because I can remember scrambling to come awake when those words caught me off guard. I consider this voice to be from God because it appears from some place other than my own consciousness. It announces itself. It speaks in a clear, simple, uncomplicated way.” <https://cac.org/grandmother-god-2020-02-12/>

God spoke to him in a way that brought his two traditions together, and that shocked him with its simplicity. That can happen to us all.

We all enter the wilderness in different ways and at various times in our lives. The wilderness can bring us to times of being alone, and it can help us meet other folks – even strangers -- along the way. Often the wilderness can do both of these things.

Army Chaplain Mel Bahr tells of her own 40 days in the wilderness...

“Nothing about seminary had prepared me for this. For three years, I had been one of many women studying for a divinity degree at Duke Divinity School. In fact, more than half of my classmates were women, and regardless of gender, almost all the students shared a similar understanding of theology and Scripture, pretty squarely within the bounds of mainline Protestantism.

Imagine my shock when, a few days after graduation, I arrived at Fort Jackson, S.C., for my basic training as an Army chaplain. Of the more than 150 students in my class, most came from religious traditions very different from -- and far more conservative than -- mine. Only four were women.

Any anxiety I felt on my arrival was confirmed hours later when we all boarded a bus to go to an event off the base.

“What are you doing here?” one of the aspiring shepherds asked me. “Women aren’t supposed to be chaplains.”

It was my first real desert experience.

In those early days, I confess, my attitude toward my new chaplain neighbors was far from loving. When forced, I could croak something that sounded civil, but I made it my mission to have no friends.

Pride is a powerful emotion. How could I embrace people who didn’t welcome me? In this sea of the unfriendly and unfamiliar, I was adrift, alone in my lifeboat. I soon realized, however, that unless I found a way to become a part of the group, I would quickly sink.

That first training experience -- officially called the Chaplain Basic Officer Leadership Course -- was exactly 40 days. Looking back, I see that even that was significant, for this was my own version of the wilderness.

Like my Israelite ancestors, I complained a lot. I buried my head in the sand, refusing to see the manna that God provided despite my ingratitude.

But also like the Israelites, toward the end of the journey I learned new ways of community. With imaginations reshaped by our training, I and my peers, despite our radical differences, became more willing to embrace each other. The night before we graduated, my squad -- the Army's version of a "small group" -- went to a local Chili's to celebrate. As we broke bread together, I saw my companions in a new light.

Yes, they were still conservative evangelicals who disagreed with me about almost everything. Yet because of our time together in the desert, we shared more than our disagreement. We now knew one another intimately, and somehow that knowledge helped us transcend our theological differences."

Mel Baars on 40 days of Chaplains training <https://faithandleadership.com/mel-baars-room-all-us>

Sometimes our time in the wilderness can make strangers seem different, and can help us see those same strangers differently. The time alone, or the time away, or the time apart in a wilderness can help us appreciate the company we do have. Breaking bread together can change the way we see one another. Sometimes it can help us meet our very selves, and can help us see the strangers who are in our lives as people around the larger table with us.

Sometimes those strangers we are hiking with -- are parts of our very selves. Or parts of our own temptations that we meet in the wilderness. Jesus met hunger and his own power to choose to not eat as a spiritual discipline as he fasted in the wilderness. Jesus met his own temptation to be powerful, and chose humility. Jesus was tempted to test God and chose to meet God instead, Jesus met the devil's temptation -- a stranger who questioned what it meant to recognize that he was the beloved son of God -- right after his own baptismal affirmation.

Jill Duffield puts it:

"I have come to view the liturgical season of Lent not only as a time of confession and repentance, but also an invitation to lay bare to our Lord all that we most want to hide from God, ourselves and others. I need to know Jesus can handle my shame and guilt, my pettiness and anxieties, my dashed dreams and my secret fears. I need to know Jesus is with me, utterly, completely and unequivocally in the most terrifying wilderness of my life. I need to know that when I give in to temptation, Jesus will, in fact, deliver me from the evil he survived and defeated."

Editor Jill Duffield <https://pres-outlook.org/2020/02/1st-sunday-in-lent-march-1-2020/>

We may think we are alone as we meet these parts of our very selves in Lent. But we are not alone. Jesus met a different kind of strangers while still in the wilderness -- the angels who came and ministered to him in his hour of need. Because God was always there with him in the wilderness -- especially when he felt it the least.

Let us have faith we are not alone as we begin this sojourn in the wilderness. God is with us.

