

1 Lent, Year A

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

What does the wilderness look like to you?

I ask because we have entered
the holy season of Lent,
the season of spiritual wilderness.

This is the time of year
when we remember how Jesus fasted
in the wilderness for forty days
and how Israel wandered
in the wilderness for forty years.

We talk a lot about the wilderness during Lent,
but what does that look like to *you*?

Because here's the secret:

It's easy during this time of year
to get caught up in the *small* things:
to reduce the spiritual wilderness of Lent
down to giving up chocolate or cursing.

Don't get me wrong.
You've heard me say it before:
Giving up chocolate,
or cursing,
or whatever you do for Lent
is good and right and *fine* . . .
but we all know
that is not the wilderness.

No, the wilderness is bigger than that.

The wilderness is the place
that terrifies you.

The wilderness is the place
where you feel all alone.

The wilderness is the place
where you wonder
if God is really there.

So . . . what does the wilderness look like to you?

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In today's reading from Deuteronomy,
we catch the people of Israel
at the *end* of their wilderness.

They have wandered forty years,
and they are finally at the Promised Land.

God says, "Look.
You are about to enter this land.
You will live here,
plant your crops,
and reap the bounty,
and life will be good
for generations and generations.
Your wilderness is at an end.

**But never forget
that it was I
who brought you through."**

In fact, God creates this elaborate ceremony
where the people of Israel are instructed
to bring the first fruits of their harvest every year,
lay them before God as an offering, and say,
"My father was a wandering Aramean.
We once were lost, enslaved in Egypt,
but you, O Lord, brought us through.
So now we give to you a portion
of what you have given to us."

It's like God is giving them a mantra,
teaching them to say
in all circumstances, good or bad:

**"God is the one who sees me through.
God is the one who sees me through.
God is the one who sees me through."**

We see this with Jesus, too.

There he is, generations later
in his own wilderness:
tempted, alone, and—who knows?—
maybe even afraid.

At the end of his wilderness,
the devil shows up and says,
“Come on.
Let’s take matters into our own hands.
Hungry?
Turn that stone into bread.
Lonely?
Worship me, and I’ll give you the people.
Scared?
Hitch your wagon to me,
and I’ll make sure you’re always safe.”

Over and over, however,
Jesus quotes the scriptures:
“Yes, but it is written;
yes, but it is written,
yes, but it is written,”
as if to say,
**“Yes, but God is the one who sees me through.
God is the one who sees me through.
God is the one who sees me through.”**

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So . . . what does the wilderness look like to you?
Because let’s face it,
the wilderness is not about chocolate or cursing.

No, the wilderness looks like
bombed out store fronts in Ukraine
and old grandmas and little babies
sleeping in subway tunnels.
By extension—if we’re honest—
it looks like the nagging fear
that global nuclear war
is still possible after all these years,
and for no good reason.

But that’s on the broadest level.
Our wildernesses are close to home, too.
And while they all look similar,
they’re also a little bit different.

For some of us
the wilderness looks like divorce.
Or it looks like worrying endlessly about your kids.
Or it looks like the power of addiction.
Or it looks like cancer.
Or it looks like hospital waiting rooms.
Or it looks like the loss of your friends to politics.
Or it looks like the struggle of caring for your elderly relatives.
Or it looks like the death of your spouse.
Or it looks like the fear
that you can never be who you really are
because you're afraid your family and friends
may never accept you as you are.

That's what the wilderness looks like.
It's different for all of us,
but it is always lonely and always real.

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So what are we to do?

Well, the end of Israel's wilderness
and God's demand to remember
exactly who got them there
gives us a clue.

Every Sunday, each of you come into this place
from your own lonely wildernesses,
and every Sunday, you, like the people of Israel,
stand on the precipice of the Promised Land.

Here, you come before this altar,
and like generations and generations before you,
you put out your hands
to give God the first fruits of who you really are,
and in turn, God gives you all of who he really is.

Whatever is making us
worried,
or lonely,
or afraid—
whatever lies
the devils whispers in our ear—
we put out our hands,
and we say,
"Yes, but God is the one who sees me through."

**God is the one who sees me through.
God is the one who sees me through.”**

Y'all, *life* is wilderness.
But whatever your wilderness looks like,
God is already there.

God was there before you got there.
God will be there on the other side.
And God is the One who will always see you through.

Amen.