

Ash Wednesday

People of God, on this Ash Wednesday evening, we enter into the wilderness of our Lenten journey – six weeks of preparing our hearts to be touched once again by the events of Holy Week and Easter. I wonder, have you previously heard the Lenten season referred to in terms of a wilderness journey? I encourage us to open ourselves to the fullness of this season of the church year. It holds great potential for nurturing our spiritual growth, both as individuals and as a congregation.

I invite us to begin now our exploration of this theme of wilderness journey by engaging in a spiritual exercise in this moment. So you may wish to write notes on your bulletin as you respond to this series of questions (if that is your style). Or you may prefer to close your eyes to let the questions wash over you in stillness.

First, invite your focus to rest on your mind. Perhaps touch a hand to your temple or forehead. **What images does the word, wilderness, provoke in your mind?** What do you see in the landscape as a wilderness comes into focus? *[pause]* Perhaps you see a barren desert... or a verdant forest... no human constructions for miles around.

Now, invite your focus to rest on your heart - your feelings. Perhaps touch a hand to your heart. **What emotion does the word, wilderness, stir in your heart?** *[pause]* Perhaps you feel fear... curiosity... ambivalence.

Finally, invite your focus to rest on your body. Perhaps touch a hand to your gut – your belly. **What sensation does the word, wilderness, elicit in your body?** *[pause]* Perhaps you sense a pit in your stomach... an eager itch in your feet... a deep breath in or a sigh?

Wandering in the wilderness is a recurring theme in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Struggle is a common aspect of wilderness wandering.

The people of Israel followed Moses around in the wilderness for forty years – hungry, tired, and longing to feel God closer than they sometimes did.

As we will hear in this coming Sunday’s readings, the Spirit of God compelled Jesus to journey into the wilderness for forty days before beginning his public ministry.

This evening, we each have the opportunity to enter into Lent with an intention of seeking the love of God within our own journeys. Let a struggle in your life rise in you this evening. It could be a long-standing struggle. It could be a new struggle that has thrown you for a loop. It could be a struggle with which you long for the courage and energy to engage.

As you open yourself to that struggle rising up within you, hear again selected words from our gospel reading in which Jesus shared about spiritual practices that support our connection with God in the midst of wilderness struggles. I invite you to listen less for what you ought to do and more for the attitude that will connect you with God. Jesus seems to call us toward humility and quietude. We heard,

“Beware of practicing your piety before others to attract their attention; if you do this, you will have no reward from Abba God in heaven. When you do acts of charity, for example, don’t have it trumpeted before you; that is what hypocrites do in the synagogue and the streets, that they may be praised by others. The truth is, they’ve already received their reward in full. But when you do acts of charity, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; your good deeds must be done in secret, and your Abba God—who sees all that is done in secret—will repay you.”

When you give of yourself to someone, Jesus invites you to do it with an attitude of quiet desire – a quiet desire to offer some bit of support as that other person faces a challenge.

As you enter the Lenten wilderness, I hope you will explore this question for yourself: **to whom do you give of yourself and yet struggle to feel a genuine desire to support that person?** How is God calling to you within that struggle? We also heard,

“And when you pray, don’t behave like the hypocrites; they love to pray standing up in the synagogues and on street corners for people to see them. The truth is, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to God who is in that secret place, and your Abba God—who sees all that is done in secret—will reward you.”

When you pray for yourself, another, or your community, Jesus invites you to not worry about the eloquence of your words. Pray with breath, with sighs, with tears – use words only if they help. God hears your prayer because God is at the center of your tears, and your sighs, and every breath. As you enter the Lenten wilderness, **I hope you will explore ways of praying without words.** And we also heard,

“And when you fast, don’t look dismal like the hypocrites. They deliberately neglect their appearance to let everyone know that they are fasting. The truth is, they have already received their reward. But when you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Don’t let anyone know you’re fasting except your Abba God, who sees all that is done in secret. And Abba God—who sees everything that is done in secret—will reward you.”

Fasting can be abstaining from food or from an activity or habit that demands too much of our heart, mind, or body energy. Fasting creates space for our spirits to be fed. If, as you enter the Lenten wilderness, you choose to abstain from a particular food, activity or habit; don’t do it just because it is the thing to do during Lent. Fast because you desire to create space in your life for your spirit.

As you enter the Lenten wilderness, I challenge you to ask yourself, **what food, activity or habit demands an unhealthy amount of my heart, mind, or body energy?**

What might it be like for you to face into your struggles this Lent, knowing that God is already woven into your selfhood and is inextricably present with you as you face into the wilderness?

Let's also reflect for moment on the clarion call from the prophet Isaiah this evening – a call to follow in the way of God's justice and compassion. Before we can arrive at the Easter celebration, we have some spring cleaning to do (or perhaps late winter cleaning to do). As we've just explored, Lent offers us a time for spring cleaning of our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. We will draw on Wayne Muller's book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, exploring new approaches to deepening our spiritual lives through simple yet profound practices.

The season of Lent is about authentic faithfulness. The season helps us sharpen our focus as we seek to follow Jesus with our whole lives. Authenticity in our discipleship means that our behaviors are true to whom we know ourselves to be. Authenticity also means conforming to Jesus (our original model) so closely that we reproduce his essential features. In speaking of faithfulness, I mean adhering steadfastly to the call we receive from Jesus.

To what does Jesus call us to be authentically faithful? In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet hears God calling the people of Israel to a radical form of spiritual fasting. God calls us to fast from complicity with systemic oppression. We heard,

*"This is the sort of fast that pleases me:
Remove the chains of injustice!
Undo the ropes of the yoke!
Let those who are oppressed go free,
And break every yoke you encounter!"*

*Share your bread with those who are hungry,
And shelter homeless poor people!
Clothe those who are naked,
And don't hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood!"*

We are called to fast from the advantages we might reap from our locations of privilege. In today's gospel reading, Jesus reminded us to make space to walk in our journeys of faith quietly and privately – all for the purpose of empowering us to answer this call to do public justice.

Many of us struggle to make space in our busy lives. But, really, how can we expect to bring our whole selves to our People's Congregational Church vision of *"an inclusive community, celebrating God's unconditional love"* if we are participating in lifestyles that more closely resemble the movement of a ball in a pinball machine than the movement of Jesus the Christ among God's people.

I will close with words from 20th century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a pacifist during World War II (and yet speaking to us in a timely way as well), he sought to be an authentically faithful disciple. He believed that there is only one calling—the call to follow Jesus. But there are as many expressions of that one central calling as there are individual people in the world. Every day, each of us encounters circumstances within which we can obey the call to follow Christ into quiet and into doing justice. This is how Bonhoeffer imagined the experience of the first disciples when they heard the call of Jesus. He wrote,

"Until that day, everything had been different. They could remain in obscurity, pursuing their work as the quiet in the land, observing the law and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. But now he has come, and his call goes forth. Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting—they must rise and follow him."

May we each seek out the attitudes, spaces and practices that will support us in making space for God – the source of Love - to feed our spirits this Lenten season.

As my clergy colleague Jennifer stated on this Ash Wednesday of 2022, "Remember that you are Love, and to Love you will return." Friends, God is with us on the journey. Never doubt that love is counting on being embodied through each of us. Amen.

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Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21