

“Wilderness Time”

Luke 4.1–13

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Ash Wednesday 2010

I’m going to say a word, and I want you to keep hold of the image that comes into your mind. Ready? **Wilderness**. What did you think of?

Here in Colorado, we probably think of Nohku Crag or a lovely hut trip behind Copper Mountain or a quiet trout stream out past Aspen. But in Jesus’ day the wilderness was not a friendly place that was admirable for its majestic scenery or its tranquility; the wilderness is a place of danger, where the comforts of civilization and the protections it affords are **gone**. It’s a place where life itself hangs in the balance...where one wrong move can mean that you’re dead.

The reality is, of course, still true. People do still die in the wilderness, like the man who, earlier this week, fell 1,500 feet into the crater of Mount St. Helens when the snow ledge on which he was standing gave way. So, when we think of biblical wilderness, it’s not a happy place, but a raw and dangerous place.

The wilderness for Jesus was also emblematic of the Exodus wanderings of his own people, who had left the comforts – and the captivity – of Egypt to be on a journey to a better place. But that “threshold time” took 40 years, not 40 days, in the wilderness. And Moses, you will remember, had to drag them kicking and screaming out of their comfortable patterns of enslaved life.

When was the last time you got shoved out of your comfort zone? When did someone challenge your most basic political or ethical or religious assumptions? When did you get the metaphorical crap kicked out of you by some experience that left you reeling? That’s the wilderness...not laying out in your sleeping back on a starry night in Rocky Mountain National Park listening to the crickets after singing songs around a campfire.

Our wildernesses are often of our own construction. As Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Generally speaking, a howling wilderness does not howl: it is the imagination of the traveler that does the howling.”

So, why would anyone in their right mind go into the wilderness voluntarily? I wonder if it’s for the same reason that people go on Outward Bound or NOLS courses voluntarily: because the wilderness is where growth and transformation happen.

It makes me wonder whether it’s possible to be a Christian and really have a sense of being isolated, safe from the wilderness. If we shut ourselves off from the world, if we make our lives so comfortable that we don’t ever experience the wilderness, how can we consider ourselves to be on the costly way of being true disciples of Christ?



One of the finest preachers in the nation is an Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, and funnily enough she has left parish ministry and is teaching at the UCC-related Piedmont College in Georgia. Taylor gave an amazing sermon called “Lenten Discipline,” in which she constructs an imagined history of the origins of Lent.

After being a follower of Jesus had become a bit “ho-hum,” when Jesus’ followers had “stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves,” and “had become devoted to their comforts instead,” that’s when Lent developed. Taylor’s description of our ancestors fits us painfully well today: “They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large.... They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud.”

Taylor's imagined history is helpful, but her challenge to us about Lenten disciplines is even more powerful, if we approach Lent as a time for a kind of spring cleaning for our souls, finding out what our "pacifiers" are: "the habits, substances, or surroundings [we] use to comfort [ourselves], to block out the pain and fear that are normal parts of being human.... It is necessary...to find out what life is like with no comfort but God." That's wilderness...the wilderness Jesus experienced. And that is when she takes us on a Lenten journey of examination and trust, but it doesn't sound easy, and she doesn't give us any free passes, either. And that's a good thing. She challenges us to name our particular addictions, the things "we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone"; she exhorts us to give them up for forty days, and to "simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction.... Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier."

The way we practice our Lenten disciplines matters, even in regard to the spirit in which we fast or read or forego chocolate. But so does the decision to practice a discipline in the first place, and to let God work through that practice to shape our faith into one that endures and grows and thrives, no matter what is going on around us, no matter what happens in our lives, no matter what we encounter out there, in the wilderness.¹

When we allow ourselves to enter the wilderness, we enable ourselves to be vulnerable and open to the God of transformation.

Will you be with me in prayer?

God, walk with us in all that we do, especially in those time when we wander through the wilderness. Walk with us, O Christ, that we might learn to place our trust in you. And help us to move outside of our comfort zones as we deepen relationship with you and with one another. Amen.

¹ With thanks to the UCC's Rev. Kate Huey and her weekly insights on ucc.org