

Sermon "A Call Into The Wilderness"  
Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4a, John 3:1-12  
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Today we continue our Lenten journey together toward Holy Week. These 40 days of preparation commemorate the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. In our first scripture reading Genesis 12:1-4a God calls Abraham and Sarah into the wilderness. We soon understand that this is an invitation to an inner spiritual journey as much as it is to a physical relocation. It is often when one takes the risk of leaving the familiarity and comfort of home and venturing into the unknown, that one discovers anew who they are and their relationship to God. Abraham and Sarah follow God's initiative, they risk losing what they know in Ur to what they do not know in Canaan. They risk the possibility of a new future with God. Sarah's barrenness tells us that their life together in Ur was no longer "life-giving." For them to move on is to risk hope in the Promised Land, while to remain is to be without a future.

*1 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading, John 3:1-9, introduces us to Nicodemus who in some ways represents the Abraham who is reluctant to leave Ur. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night—indicating he doesn't want to risk being seen with him in the daylight. When Jesus talks about being born anew or from above, Nicodemus' literalism causes him to become fixated on how a grown person can have a second birth experience rather than explore with Jesus the mystery of a spiritual rebirth. John doesn't tell us whether Nicodemus ever leaves Ur and moves "into the wilderness" with Jesus, although later in the gospel Nicodemus defends Jesus, and helps prepare his body for burial. Perhaps on this night Nicodemus takes the first step in risking beyond what he thought he knew. Listen to what the Spirit is saying:

*1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Amen.*

The title of the meditation: “A Call into the Wilderness”

*The text: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s home to the land that I will show you.’” Genesis 12:1*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for calling each of us beyond what is familiar to risk with you in the unknown paths and adventures of life and faith. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The first time Peter and I took Paul skiing was in the wilderness of northern California at Lake Tahoe. Paul was 7 years old and it was a totally new territory for him. I couldn’t help but think at the time what an advantage it was for Paul to learn the sport at a much younger age than I did. There seemed to be a trust and willingness to risk, to fall, and to get up again that was naturally building his self-confidence and preparing him for the more difficult slopes. He seemed at “home” on the mountain.

When Peter and I were not skiing with Paul that week, we were exploring the more difficult runs ...slopes that Paul would eventually ski with grace and poise. At one intersection in the mountain a sign caught my eye entitled “The Promised Land.” Right next to the proclamation was a large black diamond –indicating that this was an expert or most difficult run.

It was a poignant moment for me not because I was tempted to find my way to that particular Promised Land down a black diamond ski slope but because that sign captured the truth about our faith. Abraham and Sarah were not told that the journey to Canaan would be without risks anymore than Nicodemus was told that to be reborn spiritually would not mean giving up some of what was comfortable and familiar to him.

*The Promised Land always lies on the other side of a wilderness.*

None of us is able to participate on our spiritual journey without loss and risk. None of us is able to reach the Promised Land without going through the wilderness or see the kingdom of God through Jesus’ eyes without having a spiritual rebirth.

I paused for a moment on that mountain to thank God for the beauty surrounding me and for the richness of our faith that, without apology, announces that the Promised Land is an expert or most difficult run. We are surrounded with the strength of our faith community, and yet we are called individually into the wilderness toward spiritual maturity. The way is never easy and we can only count on ourselves and the gentle strength of God’s spirit to get us down that mountain.

The first step on that journey is a willingness to depart from our securities. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests this about Genesis 12:

*The narrative knows that such departure from securities is the only way out of barrenness. The whole of the Abrahamic narrative is premised on this seeming contradiction: to stay in safety is to remain barren; to risk the unknown is to have hope. This is echoed in the invitation of Jesus: ‘For whoever would save one’s life will lose it; and whoever loses one’s life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.’*

The second step on that journey is a willingness to be honest about ourselves and to take responsibility for our lives and our choices. The second step is personal accountability. This calls for a willingness to be confessional. We must give up the search for someone else to blame...It has been said that in generations past we went to a priest to confess our sins, but in this generation we go to a therapist to confess the sins of our parents.

Sometimes we need to confess our parents' sins and sometimes others are to blame. However, a healthy spirituality will be able to make these distinctions so that healing can take place and personal responsibility can grow. As Jesus longed for Nicodemus to be born anew, we, too, can move beyond a literalism and defensiveness to acknowledge that we are who we are as a result of our own choices. This frees us up to make new choices to follow Jesus and the call of the Spirit into the way of the wilderness.

Scottish novelist and poet William McElvaney reflects on the way of the wilderness in his book The Saving Possibility:

*...the way of the wilderness is the way of the unknown and the unmapped...it is always toward maturity, risk, discovery of self, responsible use of freedom...In the wilderness we have only one thing going for us and that is God's promise that God's spirit will sustain us and lead us and guide us...In the wilderness God's promise is our only guarantee. When we learn again and again to rely on that promise, a strange thing happens. The wilderness isn't the wilderness anymore. The wilderness has become the Promised Land.*

The psalmist proclaims:

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills—from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth...*

*The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore. Thanks be to God. Amen.*