

“In the Wilderness”
Genesis 21:8-21
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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Our topic this morning is WILDERNESS.
Why wilderness?

I’m not a big fan of the wilderness.

I certainly enjoy going hiking in mountains, just as long as I have a nice, comfortable bed to sleep on indoors at night.

You see, I’m something of a wimp when it comes to the wilderness. Sleeping OUTSIDE, under the stars, not really my thing. I don’t enjoy camping very much, and back when I was a boy, growing up in Michigan, I quit Boy Scouts because it meant being outside all day, in the winter, in 10 degree weather, waking up in the morning with a head scarf frozen on my face...

I’m not a fan of the wilderness.

But the Bible will not let me ignore the wilderness.

You will recall that WILDERNESS is a very important place throughout Scripture.

In our Gospel text, which occurs right after the baptism of Jesus, Jesus doesn’t go home after his baptism, to enjoy the day with family and close friends.

According to Mark, “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”

Or maybe you remember where did the Israelites went, when God freed them from slavery in Egypt?

They did not head straight into the Promised Land.
They wandered for forty years in the wilderness.

One of the first stories that brings wilderness front and center in the Bible is the story we heard from Genesis today. The story of Hagar and her son, Ishmael. When Hagar is treated harshly, and Abraham banishes them from his home, sending Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness.

I may be able to avoid wilderness in my recreational life.
But I cannot avoid it in my life of faith.

So why this story?
Why is WILDERNESS a good topic for today?

I think I thought of it because in so many ways, living in the midst of a pandemic might feel like the wilderness...a place where we don't know what will happen next, a place where our faith is tested.

A place where we come face to face with our own limitations.

And very much must learn to trust in God all over again, every single day.

The good news from Scripture, of course, is that God does not disappear when we're in the wilderness.

God sent angels to wait on Jesus.
God came as fire and cloud for the Israelites in the wilderness.
And God showed up for Hagar and Ishmael as well.

But there's this one **DISTINCTION** in the story of Hagar and Ishmael, something that's different than Jesus in the wilderness, or even the Israelites in the wilderness.

Jesus leaves the wilderness after 40 days.

The Israelites wander for 40 years, but then make their home in the Promised Land.

Now look for a moment at our story from Genesis.

What do Hagar and Ishmael do?

They do not run from the wilderness.

They do not try to get out as fast as they can.

They *make their home* in the wilderness.

“God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness...”

Have you ever considered making your home in the wilderness?

I'm not talking “Walden Pond” here.

Nor do I mean a vacation home to go to in the mountains.

I'm talking about the **SPIRITUAL** wilderness that each of us faces at certain times in our lives.

This wilderness comes in many different shapes and sizes.

There's the spiritual wilderness of grief, right?

C.S. Lewis spoke of it after he lost his wife to cancer.

Lewis wrote, “I cannot even see her face distinctly in my imagination...But her voice is still vivid. The remembered voice—that can turn me at any moment to a whimpering child.”¹

The wilderness of losing someone you love.

Or how about the wilderness of guilt?
Of shame?

Back when we lived in Dallas, I recall learning about George Truett. Truett was pastor at First Baptist Church in Dallas at the turn of the 20th century. He pastored that congregation for more than 40 years, growing its membership from 700 to over 7000.

But there was an event in Truett’s life that almost derailed his ministry early on.

A member of Truett’s church, JC Arnold, invited Truett on a hunting trip one day. As they were walking, Truett shifted his rifle from one shoulder to the other, and it accidentally went off, hitting JC Arnold in the lower leg.

Arnold said no big deal.

The doctors, when they saw the wound, said no big deal.

But Arnold ended up dying of complications from that gunshot wound, and George Truett—one of the best-known preachers in the city if not the country at that time—was haunted by what he had done to his friend for the rest of his life.

He was filled with shame and guilt.
He was in the wilderness.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

And then Truett had a dream,
a dream in which God said to him, “Do not be afraid!”

And Truett, who had been planning to leave the ministry, got back into the pulpit. Truett learned firsthand that God’s grace is not just found in the milk and honey of the Promised Land.

God’s grace was also there in the wilderness.²

Treating the wilderness NOT as a temporary place to plow through, but as a place to live, a place in which we are called to be faithful—have you ever thought of the wilderness in this way?

It’s why I find the story of Hagar and Ishmael so compelling.
They didn’t just SURVIVE in the wilderness.
They made it their home.

Of Ishmael, the text says:
“...he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.”

Do you see what that’s telling us?
The wilderness SHAPED Ishmael.
The wilderness HELPED Ishmael become someone he never would have been without it.

I wonder if THIS WILDERNESS will shape us too?

² The story about Truett and J.C. Arnold can be found on many different internet sites. I first heard of it in a sermon entitled “The University of Adversity,” by the Rev. Dr. Cleo LaRue, preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, June 1, 2014.

Will we have the courage to be changed in ways that God wants us to change, to grow in ways that God wants us to grow?

How can we be intentional about becoming someone whom we never would have been, had it not been for the wilderness that we're walking through right now?

One day not too long ago, I was all alone here in the church.
Or I thought I was all alone.
It was a Friday evening, shortly after 5pm.
I was getting ready to go home.

But then, leaving my office, I bumped into God.
I didn't know God was still here.
I was on my way out the door, but God said to me—Ben, I just need a couple minutes of your time.

So I figured, this is God, I can give God a couple minutes.
And God sat down in the Atrium with me.

And God had a troubled look.
Clearly, something was on God's mind.
And then God said something, and I wasn't sure at first where God was going with this.

God said to me, Ben, you've got plenty of lawyers in your church, right?

I said, Yes, there are a number of lawyers here.
And God said, That's good!

And God said, You've got accountants and doctors, right?
And I said, Yes...

And managers and business owners and entrepreneurs and teachers and nurses and stay at home parents...all those people are in your church as well, right?

I said yes.

God said, This is good.

God said, I get the sense that the people who come to this church are people who are taking good care of the hearts and the minds that I gave to each of them.

And they are generous with them.

And they are using those hearts and minds well in the world.

And I said, yes, yes....that's it.

And then God said to me:

Just make sure you don't forget the folks in the wilderness too.

I said, Well...ok.

But who is in the wilderness, God?

And God said, Oh, you know.

There are many people in the wilderness, said God.

I'm sure you know some of them.

People who have recently lost their paycheck, they might be in the wilderness. And people who make a lot of their money from the stock market, or from their chosen profession...they can get blinded by their wealth, they can be in the wilderness and not know it, said God.

I said, ah, ok, I get it.

But God wasn't done.

God said, those who are homeless and those who have one home and those who have two homes. Any of them might be in the wilderness.

God said, those who have children can sometimes be in the wilderness because of their child.

And God said, those who could never have children—they sometimes feel like they're in the wilderness too.

God said, those who are married and those who are divorced, those who have never been married and those who lost the love of their life...they can all be in the wilderness, on any given day, God said.

God said, those who have known me all their life, and those who have been confused about me all their life...all of them can be in the wilderness too.

All those doctors and entrepreneurs and nurses and teachers...even pastors like you, God said to me.

Any one of you can find yourself in the wilderness.

So pretty much everyone? I said.

Yeah, God said, pretty much everyone.

And then God said to me:

I want to make sure that I have plenty of WILDERNESS CHURCHES, because the wilderness is not only a place where anyone can end up at any point in their lives...

The wilderness, God said, is a place where anyone can GROW.

God smiled, but now I was troubled.
 And I said, But God, we're on Augusta Street.
 It's a nice neighborhood.
 It doesn't really scream...WILDERNESS.

And God said geographical location does not matter.
 God said, there only two requirements for being a WILDERNESS church:

The first is to recognize that on any given day, anyone in our church community or anyone in our Greenville community...anyone we speak with might be wandering in their personal wilderness. We need to remember that, when we're talking with people, said God.

And the second requirement to be a wilderness church is that
you're willing to be like Hagar and Ishmael.

What do you mean? I asked.

God replied:

That you'll have the courage to stay in the wilderness, as long as you need to be there.

That you're willing to grow, just like Ishmael grew, in the ways that I (this is God speaking to me) in the ways that I want you to grow.

That was the end of the conversation,
 and God went God's way, I went back home...
 but I can't get that conversation with God out of my head.³

I mean, these past few months...they have, at times, felt like the wilderness, at least to me.

³ For the idea of a conversation with God, I am indebted to a sermon by Dr. Fred Craddock, "Being a Friend of Jesus," found in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

So now I ask myself: are there ways that this wilderness has taught me that I need to grow?

Yes, there most definitely are.

- I've learned, for example, that I've got room to grow in how patient I am when things are beyond my control.
- I've learned that I can grow in how I work for justice, and how I work against PREJUDICE in our society.
- I've learned that I can grow in how much LOVE I'm willing to share, even with those I disagree with...and how much GENEROSITY I'm willing to show, especially to those I disagree with.

What have you learned during these past three months?

You see, before God left that day a few weeks ago, I told God that we are, in fact, a wilderness church.

I told God that we all are willing to grow in the ways that God wants us to grow, even when what we have to learn requires courage, even when the wilderness wants to teach us something that we had not planned on learning this year.

That's what I told God.
But now, I really need to know.

Was I right?

When I told God that we are a wilderness church,
full of people who want to learn what God
has to teach us right now...
I was speaking on your behalf.

Did I get it right?

Amen.