



“Wilderness”

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Dr. James G. Daniely

Washington Street United Methodist Church

October 15, 2023

We have been journeying through this book and we have come to the segment concerning the Wilderness. The author posits that the “path from uncertainty to wholehearted vulnerability looks less like a wide, paved, flat boulevard than a winding, sometime barely discernible track through steep hills and debris-strewn valleys.” That’s her definition of a wilderness. It can be a place of refuge and a space of disquietude. Or it may be where you both sigh in relief and feel your heart pounding nearly out of your chest as you approach the unknown. I suggest that it might also be a place where you feel abandoned by your folks and God! When you’re going through a long illness and it appears you will not get better anytime soon, that might seem like wilderness. Suppose you are in a season of loss and the pain just lingers until depression sets in, that can also be described as a wilderness. What’s your definition?

Some of us think in terms of locations on a map and see an area called a desert like the high desert of California and consider that the wilderness. You would not be wrong. Some could be walking through a dense forest and for them, that’s their wilderness. When the Europeans came to America and went beyond Virginia and encountered some folks already living there, for many this was the wilderness. The animals present there might have added to their concept of wilderness, snakes, bears, and the like. Now of course if the animals could speak, they would just call it home! So, the idea of wilderness is dependent upon your perspective.

Now from some familiar biblical narratives, the wilderness is often a barren place, like where the angel of God found Hagar, the concubine of Abraham and the mother of Ismael. In fact, it is recorded that twice an angel of the Lord met Sister Hagar in the wilderness. First when she had endured enough hostility from Sarai after being coerced into having a child for Abram, she simply departed. She in essence said, “I don’t have to put up with this drama, I’m out”! But the Angel of the Lord found her and told to return to enslavement under Abram & Sarai and submit to the treatment because when it was over God had a blessing for her. I can’t imagine what she

thought of this directive but something in her, perhaps a deeper faith in God than her masters, made her return. Then after the children were born, when Ismael & Isaac were observed playing together, jealousy on the part of Sarah, caused another split. Abraham, in support of his wife, is told to send Hagar and Ismael away again into the wilderness. Once again, an angel of the Lord finds her crying, in her despair and tells her that “God was with the boy”!

Typically, whenever Scripture takes us into the wilderness, it is usually not the barren wasteland that it at first seems. Over and over, God’s people are led to springs that flow with water, and somehow there is enough sustenance that shepherds can graze their livestock there. All manner of life-snakes and scorpions, trees and owls, wild donkeys, and such-are at home amidst the untamed terrain; what appears to us as a harsh environment is home to a myriad of animals. Perhaps, any place where we’re unfamiliar or appears to be a hardship is immediately impressed upon us as a wilderness. Is it because we can’t tame it? Does it appear forbidding because it appears foreign? Perhaps there’s an invitation into the reality of our existence, the real truth of our vulnerability.

According to the Scriptures, the children of Israel survived their 40-year long journey in the wilderness and upon looking back, saw the how the Lord God had carried them. In fact, Deuteronomy says. “just as one carries a child!” (Deut. 1:31).

Historically, from a certain perspective, this nation has been in a wilderness experience since its inception. Founded by folks yearning for certain freedoms never experienced before, they wrote about a place where liberty and justice for all was proclaimed. However, what they put into practice was anything but liberty, justice, and freedom for all. In fact, from day one a conflicted nature was present and has never been resolved adequately. There was the “Indian problem” which they proceeded to solve by first moving this problem toward the west away from areas they deemed their destiny to control. When the “problem” was not compliant, a decision was made, either overtly or covertly, to eliminate the people and solve the matter militarily.

Then with the possibility of great wealth through farming with free labor, slavery was introduced and established by some who saw the great potential. They didn’t bother to ask the slaves however, and a nation emerged that had little resemblance to the profound words of the declaration of independence. Hence, some of the citizens found themselves without liberty or justice or freedom. To solve that problem, those citizens were deeded 3/5 of a person and profit was chosen over people! Now, I am simplifying a great concept in a few words and by no means does

my understanding of reality necessarily aligns with the majority point of view! But to me, the growing malady came to a head with the Civil War. Whether or not you believe this was a war to end slavery, one outcome or result was the end of slavery. Here was a point in the nation's history that held the promise of a new identity being forged. Here a new wilderness beckoned, and a great possibility was before the nation. What would happen? Once again, profit was chosen over people! The former slaves were now free, but with little education, no land, and no plan for their future they were in foreign territory. Some laws were passed, and a very few were empowered to action. But the masses still living in the South had few options for a livelihood. Most had only known life either on a plantation or at the very least as farm hands on or near plantations. What were they going to do? Some were able to relocate, but most found themselves in a predicament. And once the power structure was able to re-assert itself, they found themselves without capital to invest in land, no government to sponsor them, and no boots by which to pull themselves up with to climb out of poverty. Many found themselves back on the plantations working the same jobs as before without hope of escaping, and meager payment for their labor. It was a catch 22 situation...Was this freedom? It was a wilderness! But that was then, what about us?

Now, I know someone is thinking, "What in the world is JD leading up to?" Is he going to continue down this path of revisionist history? If so, let's ban this book, eliminate it from our libraries, and pretend it didn't happen?

I am glad you asked. For me today, the wilderness is not just history, revised or otherwise, it can also be a state of mind. It's possible that when you are spiritually drained, outside of the will and way of God, or just depressed in your soul because of the journey life is taking you or has taken you, your wilderness is a daily reality.

If you're homeless and dependent upon others to provide for your daily sustenance, that would qualify as the wilderness. The task of finding shelter in all types of weather would to me seem like a wilderness. You are at the mercy of others to allow you a dry or warm place to sleep. Every day may be in a different location or even if it's the same location, but it's not yours! Lord have mercy! For some, that defines their existence. But God...God moves on the hearts of some benevolent people and organizations to make the wilderness a little more kind. Like our Open Table, God provides sustenance for God's children in the midst of a wilderness! The storms of life are raging all around, but God is a bridge over troubled waters!

Perhaps a little closer to home, if you're stuck in a relationship that has lost its appeal, that might be a wilderness. Communications are mono syllable, the joy of

each other's company has waned, but you're not sure what to do next. Or a loving spouse of many years has experienced the resurrection of life and you're left behind. Tears stain your pillow every other night and depression seems like a constant companion, that's a wilderness experience. Nothing is familiar, like it once was. You struggle through the loss and try to maneuver through the wilderness, but life has lost some of its luster.

Or you're on a job that is no longer fulfilling or fruitful, but your skill set won't allow you to locate a new one. Your annual reviews, once glowing with praise, now indicate you are no longer engaged. If they could fire you, they would, but the union insists that without cause, they cannot. You're miserable and would quit but you're not old enough to retire and your meager savings will not support you far beyond a few months. Apathy is sitting in and you're spiraling towards deep depression. The wilderness is where you reside and you're somewhat comfortable in it because you can hide somewhat.

Apathy...is defined as lack of interest in or concern for things that others find moving or exciting. It also means absence or suppression of passion, emotion, or excitement. Now if you're on this spectrum, my friend, you're living in a wilderness! And apathy covers a multitude of conditions that affect humankind. So, if you're feeling like I'm stepping on your toes, it's all right, my toes are hurting also! But the Good News is that Jesus has provided a way out of no way! I used to hear my elders say, "The Lord will make a way out of nowhere" and I'd say to myself, "Self, that's ignorant"! However, the longer I live and try to trust in God, I find that it makes good sense. You see as a Methodist Elder I am experienced in being by the bedside of dying members and providing words of assurance and comfort. It's one of the gifts given to me to sit with the elderly as they transition. I believe it's a holy moment. But when I sat by the bedside of my own children, apathy, or suppression of passion found residence in my abode. Oh, I continued to work in my vocation, but my joy was gone. Uncertainty in my spirit made me vulnerable... I was in my personal wilderness of apathy and didn't want to move beyond the hurt, the loss, the disappointment, the anger at God. It was there and I knew it. Have you ever been there? It's all right if you have, God carried us, like a mother carries her infant.

God carried me and sustained me, but I was not a willing participant. I knew I had to snap out of it, so to speak, but how when you just want to crawl up and die? I am glad you asked because this is the point of what I must share today.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is speaking to a multitude, living in the wilderness of life about being 'blessed'. Their wilderness is not unlike ours in that they too were

living under constraints of subjectivity by a greater power. The Roman government and the Elders of the Community had them in a bind. Their belief in God was in jeopardy because as the Chosen People, after many different conquests by foreign powers and then release, they still were not free. In addition, the Elders held them under a strict interpretation of the Law of God which left them confused and unhappy. So, with that as a background, Jesus comes to them talking about being blessed. Can you imagine living under military subjugation and without the benefit of protection under the laws of Rome and someone speaking about being blessed to you? Can you picture a life that was hard, brutal, and without any relief in sight for your children, the poor among you, and yourself and someone talking about being blessed? Was this a contradiction in their reality or just words from an itinerant preacher that made no sense? Listen in as he makes his case:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

**⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.**

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Some in the crowd must be wondering, “What is he talking about?” Can he see our daily predicament? Does he not understand that I don’t feel blessed but cursed? In this barren reality of my existence, my wilderness is all encompassing! There’s no hope! There’s no justice! And where is my God the liberator, the conquering king of promise? These are some thoughts that might have surfaced...But Jesus is not describing their present reality, he is prophesying about their future relationship in God! He’s not speaking of a utopian society created by humans but a reality already in existence, just not seen by human eyes! Therefore, as I close, let me leave you with these thoughts:

First, being blessed is not being happy, but an objective reality as the result of a divine action, not subjective feelings. So, it’s not about my present situation, or my feelings, whether I am in poverty, or pain, sorrow, depression, or whatever. It’s about my orientation toward what God will do in my/our future! Hence, it’s a call of God to the ‘marks of the church’. These are the objective realities of the church. In other words, it’s not a feat accomplished, but the end of it all. We are not there yet but one day we will be. We may linger in our wilderness for a night, but blessedness will come in the morning. The Psalmist declares, “Weeping may endure for a night,

but joy comes in the morning"! Oh, our night may be twenty or thirty years long, but if we hold out and trust in God, morning will come. Transformation of those called the Church of God will occur. All of the 'ism's' will disappear! All sin will be eradicated! Hope will be rewarded! Faith in God will be certain! God will dry all our tears! Sickness and death will be no more! Jesus has promised there's a place with him and our joy will be complete! Our wilderness will end because Jesus declares it. So, we live now in various states, but our eternity will be blessed. That's my story and I am sticking to it! Amen and bless God.