

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 10, 2019
Luke 4: 1-13

“Cultivating and Letting Go”

Most loving and gracious God, we have begun our Lenten journey with you and with each other. We pray that in these 40 days you will be with us, guiding us and teaching us. Help us to let go of the things that get in our way of making a positive influence in the world, and help us to cultivate that which furthers your work through us. We pray this in the name of the Resurrected One. Amen.

By now you’ve noticed that things are a little bit different than they were last Sunday. The colors have changed from white to purple, we have a bare tree/branches in the chancel, and the music has changed. Welcome to Lent at First Pres. I hope you grow closer to God on your journey to Easter.

Now, if you go looking for any reference to Lent in your Bible, you won’t find one because there was no such thing as Lent in biblical times. The custom of observing a 40 day period in preparation for Easter didn’t arise until later, when the initial rush of being a follower of Jesus lost its adrenaline.

You see, when Jesus didn’t return as he said he would, his followers got a little ho-hum and their faith went on auto-pilot. As Barbara Brown Taylor points out:

“(Christians) 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 no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy, and God moaned out loud.” (“Settling for Less”, Christian Century Magazine, February 18, 1998)

Knowing this, someone suggested it was time to call Christians back to their senses, and the Bible offered clues on how to do that. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning how to trust God (we heard the very end of that story earlier); and Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested by the devil. There are also other examples of the number 40 in the Bible, all of which represent a time of testing and challenge to the person or people involved because they needed to let go of their old habits that kept them separate from God and cultivate new ones that placed them closer to God.

So the early church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *Lenten*, meaning “spring”. I like to think of Lent as a time to do some spring cleaning of your soul. It’s a time to get rid of the clutter in your life, both the literal and metaphorical stuff, so that you have room in your life for God, and space to grow closer to God. I’m a big believer that we have stuff in our lives that squeezes God out . . .it might be a bad habit we formed, or a grudge we can’t let go of, or a deep seated mistrust or insecurity, or an addiction, or a creature comfort that we think we can’t live without. These things have the potential of pushing pushing God out of our lives.

Lent is the time to let go of these things, these old habits, and cultivate new ones so that, when we arrive at Easter, we will be closer to God and, therefore, be better followers of Jesus Christ.

So, here at First Pres, you might hear some things or learn some things or be asked to do some things that challenge you and require you to do some deep cleaning of your soul. We’ll reflect on the things we need to let go of and the things we need to cultivate. In your bulletin are pieces of origami paper; on the paper, you’re invited to write down something you want to let go of or cultivate . . . and then drop it in the offering plate or leave it in the basket in the Narthex – the papers will magically turn into little origami cranes where they’ll grace our tree – which is our way of giving those things to God – and by the time we get to Easter we should have a tree in full bloom just budding with new life. A sure sign of the resurrection promise that God can make all things new.

Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem begins the same way in all 4 Gospels. His journey begins with his baptism. This was a life-changing experience for

Jesus and it gave him a new direction, a new name (“the Son of God”) and a new vocation. Three of the four Gospels all agree that the very next thing that happened to Jesus is that he goes into the wilderness for 40 days. While he’s there, he’s tempted by the devil with loaves of bread, all the power in the world, and all the glory the world can give him. And to each of these temptations, Jesus says no.

Since you’ve probably heard enough sermons on that part of the story, I thought I’d skip that part today. Instead, I want to focus on where the test took place, the wilderness, because I have a sneaking suspicion that all of us have been in some sort of wilderness, be it literal or metaphorical. We have gotten lost there, wondered where God was, and couldn’t wait to get the you-know-what out of there. So, since we’ve all been there and chances are good may wind back there, we may as well learn to cultivate new habits that help us to live in the wilderness and let go of the old ones that only cause us to panic, cry, get angry, and turn to our preferred source of anesthesia and instead turn to God. Because believe it or not, God is in the wilderness. And, and, God does some of God’s best work with people who are in the wilderness.

Wildernesses take many different forms. Maybe your wilderness looked like a hospital waiting room, or a doctor’s office when you got news you really didn’t want to hear . . . maybe it looked like your empty office at work on the day you learned you were being let go, or maybe it was your empty office on the day of your retirement, when you realized you needed to forge a new identity for yourself; maybe your wilderness looks like the fellowship hall of a church where you go to find recovery and meet with other addicts; or maybe it was a strange bed you slept in after getting kicked out of your house or getting divorced or going off to school or living in your first apartment because you had to re-learn how to navigate your way in the world.

The thing about being in the wilderness is that it’s no fun, no fun at all. We’re lost in the wilderness, and I don’t know anyone who likes being lost. In the wilderness the old ways and habits and devices that kept us going and moving in a certain direction no longer work. Our cell phones don’t get any reception and if we’re there long enough they go dead. And since most

of us aren't prepared to live in the wilderness, we haven't brought along our charger. So there we are, feeling very alone. What do we do now?

About 14 years ago I spent 5 days in the hospital for an undiagnosed and unknown illness. I woke up one morning with what can best be described as a migraine headache. Unable to lift my head or stand without feeling like someone was stabbing a knife into my head, I told my husband Terry we needed to head to the Hospital.

I remember lying on a table in the ER and having a doctor stand over me saying, "If you can't stand up, you can't go home." Try as I might, I couldn't stand up. So, I was admitted. I'd never stayed in the hospital other than to have babies; about the worst of hospitals I'd ever experienced was 21 stitches to my knee. I can remember they took me on a gurney to go have my head x-rayed, and I had to wait for what seemed like forever in the hallway of the hospital, on that gurney, and I've never felt so alone in all my life. I remember the next day a member of my former church came to see me, and I told him they'd x-rayed my head and hadn't found anything there, and he told me that the church had known that along.

I stayed there 5 days, and they never figured out what was wrong with me.

But my wilderness didn't end there, because the pain persisted . . .for months. Any little move, for no known reason, could send pain like knives shooting through my head. Bending over was especially hard, and that was something I did a lot of back then with 3 children between the ages of 1 and 5.

About 2 months after my hospitalization, Terry's Mom died, which is a wilderness experience you can only understand if you've lived through it yourself. I can remember a certain member of his family, who everyone talked about not having her act together, driving me from the funeral home to his aunt's house, and on the way I had to ask her to stop off at the side of the road because I was sick. And I can remember thinking to myself, "Who's the one who doesn't have her act together now?" It was rock bottom for me.

At a subconscious level, I knew I needed to let go and let God, as it were. When you're this deep in the wilderness, there's not much else you can do. This rock-bottom level of trust may come naturally for some, but I need to be honest with you and tell you that it doesn't come that naturally for me. I had to learn it, there in the wilderness. I had to let go of those old habits of self-determination and self-reliance and the "I can do anything if I work hard enough" attitude-habits that had gotten me that far in life-and cultivate new habits, because those old ones didn't work in my wilderness.

With those new skills, I eventually found my way out of the wilderness. I learned the skill of handing over the reigns of control to God, and I relied on the support of other people, all of whom had also spent time in the wilderness. See, that's the things about wildernesses, after you've been there you're much more empathetic to those who are in them.

Since then, I've learned to hone the skill of letting go and letting God in small times of wilderness. And that has helped me when I've found myself back in the wilderness.

Someone once wrote that, "The hardest thing for any of us to believe is that the wilderness has anything to do with God. It rather feels like God has vanished. But the gospel tells us that it was the Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness...not a personal mistake, not a deed of punishment, not the devil, but the Spirit of God."

I don't know if the Spirit of God led me to get sick that day in October of 2004; I'd like to think the Spirit didn't, but when I can look at that experience from the outside in, I can see that the wilderness is God's gift to us, for we learn from these moments, and from Jesus, that we must live an Easter faith in a Good Friday world, or a Good Friday body, as the case may be. We learn to trust God to the very core of our being, because only when we have been tested beyond our own strength can we learn to rely on the One who was tested beyond measure and yet remained strong for us.

Since we cannot predict when we'll be thrown into the wilderness, the best we can do is prepare for it in small ways. So here's what I want you to do this week to prepare for your wilderness. I want you to think about what

you need to let go of; are they distractions or temptations? Do you need to let go of your need for personal power and profit? Or like me, do you need to let go of your need to be in control and let God be in control? Jesus resisted the devil's temptations for power and control and instead chose to cultivate a life of faithfulness, devotion and resistance. What do you need to let go of in order to let God in?

And as you do these things, remember the story of the Israelites, the one we heard today. They spent 40 years in the wilderness; 40 years. Before they stepped foot in the Promised Land, God told them to remember. Remember, God said, the time you spent here, and remember that I was faithful to you when you were here. And then God gives them a command, a command that runs throughout the Torah: "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Be empathetic to those who are in the wilderness; support them with your kindness and prayers; don't cast judgment; be a reflection of God's love and concern for them.

Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Settling For Less", Christian Century Magazine, 1998

Feasting n the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Readings for the 1st Sunday in Lent