



Full to the Brim: Even In The Desert
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I grew up in a family whose summer vacations almost always included a pop-up camper in tow and a national park as our destination. We loved getting away to the mountains and the ocean, we loved driving around campgrounds until we found the site that had the perfect place for our hammock, and we would spend our days really being away. Most of the time it was the fun kind of adventure – following a trail with clear signs and a clear path to natural wonders, taking our boots off and letting our feet soak in mountain springs, snacking on trail mix whenever we found a big rock for all of us to sit on for a few minutes, and arriving at views of waterfalls and mountain lakes that literally do take your breath away.

And then, of course, there were also the tough adventures – the times the sun was setting and we were nowhere near the end of the trail, times when our water supply was running short, or the blister on someone’s heel was making every step painful, and the time when my dad was trying to help me cross a stream with my youngest sister on his shoulders, and while I was able to jump safely to the other side, when I leaped, I pulled my dad and sister right into the stream. We were at about mile 1.2 of a 10 mile hike... and it’s a hike at Holden Village that we’ve done a hundred times since, and you better believe there is no crossing that stream without that story being told.

I love being in the wilderness. I love getting away, I love not knowing what’s behind the next bend, I love a physical challenge, I love the silencing of

noises I'm used to and the arrival of sounds and smells that are foreign and surprising. Maybe more than anything, I love how food tastes outside. The most mundane PB&J can taste like a gourmet sandwich when you're out in the middle of nowhere.

But having dwelled in the scripture for today, where Jesus is sent by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days, I say I love the wilderness, but it's probably more honest to say I love a *managed* wilderness experience. I love to get out in it, but admittedly I love it when I have good gear, and a map, plenty of chocolate, and the promise of a shower at the end of the day.

And this is not exactly how wilderness works in the Bible, or in our own lives. It wouldn't be true wilderness if we could manage it. That's the whole point.

Our Bible tells us story after story of our ancestors in the faith who could not get to any kind of promised land, who could not find clarity, or even God, without first fumbling their way through the wilderness. Hagar and Jacob fled to the wilderness to get away from troubled relationships; the community of Israel was banished to the wilderness for not trusting God; the prophet Elijah hid in the wilderness to escape political persecution; and today, of course, we see Jesus, right after his baptism, sent by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness, to fast and to pray, to face the enticing temptations of this world, and to show us what is worthy of our trust.

In the Bible, the wilderness is a place of danger and disorientation, a place where the way is not clear. In life, wilderness is the long journey of grief; it's a season of caregiving that strains your reservoirs of patience and perseverance; it's the aftermath of divorce or the first unstructured days of retirement; wilderness

is any time when we find ourselves in-between¹ - in-between jobs, in-between relationships, in-between a relapse and sobriety, in-between our faith shattering and being slowly rebuilt, in-between our pre-pandemic world and our post-pandemic world, whenever that will be, and this week, we of course must add the in-between that our world is in, somewhere in-between a world order that we've ascribed to since WWII and that same world order being fundamentally called into question, at the grave expense of our siblings in Ukraine.

Sometimes we choose the wilderness. Sometimes we're sent to the wilderness. But most of the time, I think, the wilderness chooses us. Comes to us unbidden, unplanned.

It's not lost on me that the last time I preached on Jesus' experience in the wilderness happened to be March 9, 2020, exactly two years ago almost to the day, and we had no idea on that Sunday that 5 days later we would be canceling in-person worship and navigating those early pandemic days, when we were first learning terms like social distancing and community spread, and figuring out how to safely get groceries and go to school virtually. Talk about a wilderness none of us chose. Talk about a wilderness that has lasted so much longer than we ever could have anticipated. I rarely remember the words that I preach, but I do remember that, in my sermon that day, I shared with you one of my favorite quotes, one that I've rehearsed more than once in the last two years, and that some of you have even said back to me a few times – “They say that when one door closes, another one opens. But it is hell in the hallway.”

Wilderness is the hallway in-between a season that ends and a new season not yet begun. And it can be hell there, as we know. It's disorienting, it's scary, it's

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*, 48.

a place where most of our resources feel defunct, and where trying harder only makes it worse. Instead, surrender, patience, waiting, listening, prayer – these are the rubrics of the wilderness. And that can be so hard

When everything is stripped away, as it is in wilderness times, we see our vulnerability in a clearer way. It's why most of us avoid the wilderness at all costs. And like Jesus, we see how tempted we are to reach for things that can fill the emptiness. For some of us, it's food, for some of us, it's mindless scrolling through social media, for some of us, it's busyness or exercise or shopping or alcohol. We all have our thing. And none of these things are inherently bad, by the way; they're only tempting because, on some level, they are good and enjoyable.

But part of what makes the wilderness so powerful, often so life-changing, is that these desires and devices don't work to weather the wilderness. We have to discover what is there when we no longer have the distractions and coping mechanisms to fill in that raw space. And it's for that very reason that I believe the wilderness is a laboratory unlike any other for cultivating trust. Trust in that which is actually worthy of our trust. By getting us enough out of the familiar, by detaching us from the things we always grab onto, we are gifted the experience of having to rely on something other than self, on something other than comfort, or knowledge, or control, or wealth. We have to, and we get to, rely on God and the daily manna that God promises to provide.

And what's beautiful and redemptive in all of this, is that we get to see the way that is created for us, rather than the way we were trying so hard to create for ourselves. The way of faith is precisely this – that when we have nothing left, there is still something there. That when we can't see the way for ourselves, a way is made for us. And we learn in all of this that the wilderness we've been

avoiding is precisely the place that leads us to God, to the maker of manna, to the wellspring of water that springs forth even in the desert.

In the wilderness, Hagar discovered a well.

In the wilderness, Moses encountered a burning bush.

In the wilderness, the Israelites received the 10 commandments.

In the wilderness, John the Baptist dunked people in waters that led them to a new way of life.

In the wilderness, Jesus did some of his deepest soul-searching, resisting the lure of power and control, and placing his trust instead in the One from whom grace never stops flowing.

The wilderness is a hard and holy place, a place where we leave behind what we know and discover anew the God who has known us, and loved us, and provided for us, the whole time.

Our Lenten theme is “Full to the brim,” and as Pastor Paisley said in worship on Ash Wednesday, it’s a bit of a different twist on the season of Lent. We’re focusing less on restraint and self-discipline, as we feel like we’ve done plenty of that over the last 2 years, and we’re focusing more on the abundant, life-giving grace of God. And one thing I want to be really clear about is that this focus is not in any way intended to ignore or minimize the pain of our lives or of our world; if anything, this series invites us to go even deeper into these experiences, to say yes, this is awful, yes, this is painful, yes our whole world feels like a desert some days and we have no idea what the coming days will bring *and... and... God is in it, God is somehow in it. And we’re going to probe the fullness of life, the beautiful and the hard, the good and the broken, the mountain tops and the deserts, because life is at its fullest when we make space for it all,*

and when we cultivate eyes that are able to see grace at work in all of it. If grace can spring up in the wilderness, if some of our most important insights about life and God can come from a place that looks at first blush desolate and lifeless, then grace will spring up wherever we find ourselves, and that's what we're setting out to find over the next 40 days.

So we start in the wilderness, the same place Jesus started. We start with our questions, we start with our temptations, we start with the parts of ourselves and our world that feel lost and uncertain. Most of us want to escape the wilderness as fast as possible, but may you hear an invitation today to stay for awhile. Jesus didn't want to be there either, but he stayed, for 40 days, and he came through it crystal clear about who he would worship and trust for the rest of his days. May we be led to do the same. To linger, to wrestle, to allow the wilderness to work on us a bit. God will meet us there, as God has always done, and that means that grace will find us and make a way for us.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**