

## **Blessed Wilderness**

By Rev. Eric Moeller, St Lucas, March 9-10, 2019

I'd be surprised if I hadn't shared this with y'all at this point, but I need to remind you today that I am a big Harry Potter fan. I love the series, both the books and films, but I try to watch the movies once a year or so, in spite of having seen the train scenes hundreds of times for Keagan's enjoyment. Other than the enjoyment, lessons, and inspiration I draw from the movies, the sort of added benefit of this practice is that I get reminded of how useful the films are for providing sermon illustrations like this one. So in the fifth installment of the series, called *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry discovers he shares a mysterious connection to the series' villain, the Dark Lord, Voldemort, that allows him to see into Voldemort's mind. This connection enabled Harry to save a friend when he saw that Voldemort was harming him. What is troubling for Harry, though, is that as the connection seems to grow stronger he feels like he may be becoming evil himself, becoming more like Voldemort. He shares these feelings with his godfather, Sirius Black. Sirius responds by saying, "The world is not divided into those who are good or bad. We all have light and dark within us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That is who we really are." In the end, Harry will reject Voldemort's temptations and his way of being in the world, and Harry will come to recognize that love for others and friendship is what sets him apart from Voldemort and that is the right, life-giving path. But what Sirius is getting at in his conversation with Harry is really just part of the human condition. Part of being human is having to wrestle with which part, the light or the dark, we will act on, which is truly wrestling with our very identity. We have to figure out who we are and who we want to be, and how we are going to live in the world. We have to decide, even from moment to moment, how it is we will use our power, resources, and gifts, and what the guiding principles for our lives will be. Being that we acknowledge Jesus the Christ as being fully human, it should come as no surprise then that he too had to wrestle with these questions. He had to come to terms with who he was, how he would use his gifts and power in the world, and what that would mean for his future.

At Jesus' baptism, he hears a voice from heaven telling him he is the Son of God, God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased. Jesus is one of the lucky ones who is told in no uncertain terms exactly who he is, but now he must deal with it; he is going to have to figure out what it means for his living. At the same time, the Spirit falls upon him and drives him out into the wilderness. Here in the wilderness is where he will really figure out who he is, where he is going, and how he will live.

The text says that he was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted by the devil. Now, I tend to think of this in metaphorical terms. I don't think the author intends that we envision a red guy with horns and a pitchfork that, according to what will come in this story, has just as much power and sovereignty as God, literally standing with Jesus having a conversation. I think, in the wilderness, Jesus is having a deep conversation within himself trying to come to grips with his identity as the Son of God and figuring out what that means for his actions. He is discerning between light and dark.

Each of the offers that 'the devil' makes Jesus begin with the words, "If you are the Son of God," though it may better be translated, "Since you are the Son of God."<sup>1</sup> This is the question of what his identity means. It's as if Jesus is working this out, "Well if this is true, since I am the Son of God, then I could do this: I could turn a stone into bread, I could rule the world, I could jump off of a building and not be harmed." Now, on their face, none of these actions seem all that evil, bad, or dark. N.T. Wright says, "the devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make a lot of sense."<sup>2</sup> They do. However, each offer boils down to being self-interested. One is to satisfy his own hunger, one is to bring himself glory and power as ruler of the world, and the other is to test his own safety. Jesus, it seems, could choose to use his power in self-serving, easy, perhaps magical ways...or he could choose another way. With each of these inclinations Jesus has to take an easy, self-interested path,

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Van Driel, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Easter (First Sunday of Lent)*, ed. David L. Bartlett; Barbara Brown Taylor. (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 1751.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Kathryn Matthews, [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_march\\_10\\_2019](http://www.ucc.org/worship_sermon_seeds_march_10_2019)

there comes a response from another part of himself that keeps him grounded in God and God's ways. He thinks, "Well since I'm the Son of God, I could just turn that stone into bread and eat, but God says that there is more to living than bread so I won't do that," or, "Well since I'm the Son of God, I could just rule the world by making it so, but God says to worship and serve only God, so I won't go that way." "Well since I'm the Son of God, nothing bad can happen to me, right? Maybe I should find out, but God is not to be tested." At the end of this internal dialogue he has made his choice of what he will act upon, how he will live in the world as the Son of God; he will act upon God's will and direction; he will act upon the light within himself. He won't just feed himself, but will feed others. He will reign, but not by force or coercion. He will not stay safe, but he will live and give life to others. Jesus exits the wilderness knowing who he is and dedicated to a path that may be difficult, but it is right. He exits the wilderness dedicated to being obedient to God, and using his power and authority in the service of God's purposes, and God's purposes only, even when doing so will bring him great pain and harm.

In the course of our lives, we all will find ourselves in moments of discernment, trying to figure out who we are, who we want to be, and what kind of impact we wish to have on the world. Again, it is part of the human condition that even Jesus could not avoid. This wrestling with identity is not confined to us as individuals, though, it also applies to our communal life as a congregation.

Friends, in the present moment we find ourselves in the wilderness. There are a lot of unknowns, it seems, and much to discern. We are entering a time when it is important that we wrestle with our congregational identity; that we ask important questions regarding who we are and who we believe God is calling us to be. It is important that we seek God's guidance for the way forward. We may look upon our current situation and believe we are famished and be tempted to find the quickest way to turn a stone to nourishment. We may be tempted to try to find an easy way to try to draw people in quickly to build ourselves up. We may be tempted to try to stay safe. This text, however, calls us to something more. It calls us to linger in the wilderness for a bit. It calls us not to find the easiest path forward, but the right path. It calls us to really figure out what it means that we are a gifted, powerful, member of the Body of Christ in the world. It calls us to seek out a way of being that is not just self-serving, but obedient to God and God's purposes for the world. It calls us to accept that risks may be necessary for us to be who God would have us be. Obviously, this time in the wilderness facing such considerations will not be simple, easy, or fun and pleasant all of the time. The same was true of Jesus' experience. However, I believe this time in the wilderness will be life-giving. It will be meaningful. It is full of possibility for our future together. We will emerge knowing more fully who and whose we are; knowing how we are called to use our gifts and power for God's purposes, and being more deeply unified and connected by the Spirit, for the Spirit is with us in this time. As John Stendahl writes, "the wilderness is not God-forsaken nor does it belong to the devil. It is God's home. The Holy Spirit is there, within us and beside us. And if we cannot feel that spirit inside of us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far away, with enough in him to sustain us, enough to make us brave."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.