

“Wilderness Whys and Ways”

Have you ever found yourself in a situation not of your choosing? in a place where you didn't want to be?  
an uncomfortable place, a lonely place, a scary place?  
Did you find yourself asking, “How did I get here? Why am I here?”  
Is there some reason, some purpose, some plan in all of this?  
Could it possibly lead me to something better? something more?  
somewhere closer to where I ultimately want to be?

If so, you're not alone.  
Not only have the rest of us all been to such a place, but so has Jesus.

He had just had the most wondrous experience of his life!  
He had been baptized.  
He had heard God speak the words, “With you I am well pleased.”  
He had felt God's love completely surround and fill him.  
And he had seen and felt the Spirit of God descend upon him  
and fill him with a joy he had never before known.  
It had been amazing, the high point of his life...

...and then the next thing he knew, he was all alone in the middle of a desert,  
not at all where he had expected to be,  
not at all where he'd planned to be,  
not at all where he wanted to be.  
And he found himself wondering,  
“How did I get here? Why am I here? Is there some reason, some purpose, some plan?”  
Could this place possibly lead me to something better, something more,  
somewhere closer to where I ultimately want to be?

Why did Jesus have to go through this wilderness experience? Why do we?

The story of Jesus' wilderness experience is told in 3 gospels.  
In Matthew and Luke, it's an extended story that describes 3 different temptations.  
In Mark, it is a brief, concise, sparse account of just 2 sentences,  
but within those 2 sentences we discover 3 things.

First, according to Mark, Jesus was driven into the wilderness.  
He didn't end up there by chance, and he wasn't led there.  
There was something that drove him,  
something that impelled him, something that compelled him.  
Second, what drove him there was not the devil as we're apt to assume, but the Spirit –  
the same Spirit that had descended upon him in his baptism and that now resided within him.  
And third, the reason that the Spirit drove him there  
was so that he could be tempted, tested by the devil, Satan, or literally, the Adversary.

And so **when we find ourselves in the wilderness**, in the desert,  
in an uncomfortable, scary, lonely place not of our choosing,  
we can remember that **it very well may be the Spirit that has driven us there**  
**and that we have been driven there for 4 reasons.**

## **1. So that we can Discern our Destination.**

The first reason that we may find ourselves in the wilderness

has to do with our purpose, our dream, our vision, our goal, our destination, where we're going.

Sometimes our lives are so scheduled with routine activities

and our minds are so cluttered with nonproductive thoughts,

and our hearts are so wrapped up in negative feelings

that we lose our perspective, our sense of direction, our *raison d'être* or reason for being.

Sometimes we need to have space and time to still our bodies, quiet our minds, and calm our spirits.

Sometimes we have to let go of all the outer things, in order to rediscover the peace within.

Sometimes we need to step away from where we are, to regain perspective & reorient our lives.

Up until he was 30 years old Jesus led an ordinary, non-descript, unremarkable life.

If things had not changed, we would never have heard about him.

But after the life-changing event of his baptism and his subsequent time in the wilderness,

he emerged with a clear sense of mission.

What his mission was prior to this we don't know. We don't know even if he had a clear sense of mission.

But after his time in the wilderness he was able to sum it up in a few sentences:

“The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Many times I think that when we settle on a goal, we set our lives on automatic pilot

and never stop to consider if the destination to which we're heading

is still the destination God really has in mind for us.

When as a child I was told I couldn't be a pastor because I was a girl,

I eventually determined that my destination would be to become a church musician.

It wasn't until decades later when a professor in seminary said,

“You felt called to be a pastor. Your church has been ordaining women for years now.

Why aren't you on the ordination track?”

that I realized I had determined my destination decades before

and had never stopped to re-evaluate if that was really where I still wanted to go,

and more important, if that was where God was calling me.

**So the 1st thing our time in the wilderness can do is help us Discern our Destination.**

## **2. The second thing our time in the wilderness can do is to Plan our Path,**

to help us figure out how we are going to get to where we want to go.

One of the reasons so many of us have unrealized dreams, unmet goals, unfulfilled expectations

is that we think that whatever brought us to where we are, will take us to where we want to go.

We think that the way that brought us here is the way that will take us there, but that's not necessarily so.

If we keep doing the same things that we have always done, we will likely stay in the same place that we are.

If we want to get to a different place we've got to travel a different road.

Or to look at it another way, if we keep doing the same thing and expecting different results...

well...we all know that that's the definition of insanity.

If we want to get to a place we've never been, we need to take a road we've never taken.

Whatever Jesus was doing for the first 30 years of his life

was not what would get him to where he wanted to go or where God was calling him.

To do that he needed to do something different.

If he had been sitting in a synagogue with a little congregation for 10 years and it hadn't gotten him anywhere,

then continuing to sit in the same synagogue with the same little congregation

was not going to get him anywhere different.

And so after his baptism and after his time in the wilderness,

Jesus publicly proclaimed his new destination and then he set out on a new path,

leaving the synagogue and his congregation behind and going out to call new disciples to follow him.

If I want to lose weight, I can't keep eating & burning the same number of calories that I've been eating & burning.

If neither my diet nor my exercise routine changes, I'm not going to lose weight.

So if I want to lose weight, I've either got to cut more calories from my diet or burn more calories through exercise.

**To get to the new Destination I've Discerned, I need to Plan a new Path.**

**3. So our time in the wilderness can help us to Discern our Destination, and Plan our Path, and it can also Train us for our Travels.**

Jesus was going to have to deal with the devil in his ministry,  
so in order to prepare for that eventuality, Jesus needed the opportunity to train.

Our muscles don't get strong by sitting on the sofa and watching television.  
Our muscles get strong when we train them, and to strengthen our muscles we need resistance.  
If I keep lifting 10 lbs. and never increase the reps or the amount of weight, I'll never get any stronger.  
In order for my muscles to get stronger, I need to increase the reps or I need to increase the weight.  
It's the resistance that makes my muscle strong.

Our wilderness experience might have something to do with our physical bodies  
or our wilderness might be an emotional place or a psychological place or a spiritual place.  
But just like we can't strengthen ourselves physically without exercising our bodies,  
we can't develop strength emotionally unless our emotions are tested,  
and we can't develop strength spiritually unless our faith is tested.  
St. Paul writes that *"We rejoice in our sufferings  
because we know that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character  
and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us."* [Rom 5:3-5]

**And so our time in the wilderness can help us do 3 things:  
Discern our Destination, Plan our Path, and Train for our Travels.**

**4. And there's one more thing that our time in the wilderness can provide –  
the knowledge that God is with us to Accompany us on the Adventure.**

It was the Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness and it is the Spirit who drives us there  
so that we, like Jesus, have the opportunity

**to Discern our Destination, Plan our Path, & Train for our Travels**

but sometimes it may be difficult to see or hear or feel God's presence initially.

Mark tells us that during Jesus' time in the wilderness angels ministered to him, protecting him from harm.  
And just as God sent messengers to Jesus, so God will send messengers to us –  
with words of hope and faith and peace and strength.

As long as you and I have breath, our work on this earth is not done.

As long as we are alive, we are meant to grow and to change and to become more of who we are meant to be.

As long as we have life ahead of us, we have a road to travel.

Jesus' road led him from the beauty of baptism to the desolation of the desert.

But his experience in the wilderness was every bit as necessary as his baptism.

While he was there,

**he Discerned his Destination, Planned his Path, Trained for his Travels,  
and learned that God would Accompany him on his Adventure.**

The same is true for us.

**So next time you find yourself in the wilderness, remember:**

**it is the Spirit who has driven you there and who has driven you there for a reason:  
so that you may Discern your Destination, Plan your Path, Train for your Travels,  
and come to know that no matter how alone you may feel, God is with you,  
ministering to you, protecting you,  
and Accompanying you on the Adventure. Amen**