

# *Thin Places in the Wilderness*

*The Second Sunday of Lent, February 25, 2007*

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*Jesus, our Lenten work begins. Exercise our souls. Correct our sagging, wild, sluggish spirits. Give us spiritual muscles, and docile quick faith. Let us come forth from the wilderness filled with your Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> Amen.*

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Today we go, with Jesus, to the wilderness. The wilderness is a place where we always encounter our greatest temptations, our greatest fears, and our greatest dangers. I believe that the wilderness is an archetypal, eternal, divine “thin place” – where we also always encounter God. The early stories in our salvation history give proof to existence of this thin place time and time again.

Abraham and Sarah were called to leave family and home and trek across the great wilderness of modern day Iraq and Syria. Heading to a place that they did not know.

Hagar was exiled into the wilderness, by that same Abraham and his wife Sarah. Sent into the desert with her child Ishmael to die.

Isaac found himself in the wilderness one day. Traveling with his father to a mountain, for an encounter with God that he could never have imagined.

The story of our original family in the faith that – most archetypal as well as dysfunctional tribe of Abraham – continues with the story of young Joseph. Joseph also went into the wilderness to find his eleven brothers. Instead he found himself cast into a pit by those same brothers, eventually sold into slavery.

Moses thought he was doing a very good job hiding from both the Egyptians and from God while he was in the wilderness tending those sheep on the mountainside. There is story after story in the history of the Hebrew people, our fathers and mothers in the faith, where we find the characters of the drama in the wilderness.

Walter Brueggemann, the leading Christian scholar of the Hebrew Scripture in this generation, describes a theology of the wilderness as one of vulnerability.

***A place where there is no visible means of support, other than that support that is found in grace of God. The wilderness is a place where anxiety runs high.<sup>1</sup>***

Brueggemann cleverly and clearly transforms our consideration of wilderness for that of a *place*, to that of a state of mind. I wonder if that kind of wilderness sounds familiar to any of us. Not a wilderness of place. But a wilderness of the soul. Those places where we experience emptiness, isolation, loneliness, fear, silence.

That horizon that might look trackless and barren when it seems like we are stuck in a job or career. When going to work every day, day after day, year after year seems mindless.

Or perhaps what is likely an even more frightening landscape – the reality of not having a job, when you need one.

Or the isolation felt when facing the years of retirement before we are ready.

How many people do we know who exist in the barrenness and solitude of a relationship or marriage that is failing, or worse yet – already failed but neither party has noticed?

Or a wilderness that can be just as lonely, the years that stretch before us when our spouse or partner dies too soon.

How many of us have wandered in the wilderness of addiction? Chained to alcohol, drugs or sex? With no energy to get out of the pit?

There's a reason why we have so many stories about the wilderness in Scripture.

***It's the place where so many of us spend so much of our time.***

The kind of wilderness that we all too often find in the stories *of our own lives*, much less in the lives of the Hebrew children.

But remember that the wilderness is a thin place. We can find ourselves too, too close to addiction and loneliness and isolation in those thin wilderness places.

But we can also find ourselves very, very close to God. God is in that same thin place.

Always there.

Always patient.

Always ready for us to remember and renew the relationship.

Abraham found the Promised Land at the end of his wilderness.

Hagar and Ishmael thought they were alone and dying in the wilderness, until she cried out and God showed them not only a spring of water, but the future of becoming a great people.

Isaac found himself tied to a rock on a mountain in the wilderness, but God himself provided the offering, and the Covenant and promise were maintained.

Joseph's short trip in the wilderness to find his brothers resulted in his being sold into slavery in Egypt. But finally, he was the instrument used by God to once again maintain the Covenant and preserve Abraham's seed forever. Moses wasn't hiding nearly as well as he thought. God had Moses right where he wanted him. His first sojourn in the wilderness ended for Moses at the burning bush, where God gave him the greatest commission that a human had yet received.

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The wilderness, into which Jesus was led by the Spirit, *is not* our wilderness. His temptations there, *are not* our temptations. The journey of Jesus into the wilderness did not come to an end, really, until he endured that final wilderness – the cross.

Remember the theology of wilderness laid out by Brueggemann:

***A place where there is no visible means of support, other than the support that is found in grace of God. A place where anxiety runs high.***

If there was ever such a person in such a place, it was Jesus on the cross.

The wilderness experience of Jesus was not ours. The temptations of Jesus are not ours. We each have our own unique wilderness, our own individual temptations.

When we are led into our own thin places by the Spirit during this season of Lent, may we have the same prayer at the end, as at the beginning:

Jesus, our Lenten work begins. Take us to a place of quiet. Exercise our souls. Correct our sagging, wild, sluggish spirits. Give us spiritual muscles, and docile quick faith. As we are led into, so let us come forth from, the wilderness filled with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Revised from The Center for Liturgy at St. Louis University:  
<http://liturgy.slu.edu/1LentC022507/prayerpathmain.html>

<sup>1</sup> *Reverberations of Faith. A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes.* Westminster John Knox Press. 2002. pages 231-232