

WILDERNESS JOURNEY
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March 5, 2017
First Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim and came to the wilderness on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. (Exodus 16:1)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights and was famished. Afterwards, the devil left him and angels came to him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

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Today is the First Sunday in Lent. And today is the first day of a new wilderness journey for you and me. Beyond the wilderness awaits the Promise Land. I'm counting on that and you can count on that, too.

Lent is the season of wilderness. The wilderness is a bewildering and frightening place to be. The wilderness exposes our vulnerability and mortality. It tests our faith and capacities. The wilderness prompts existential questions.

Will we survive the long trek? Can we make it through?

Yes, we can.

Yes, we will.

The wilderness prepared the wandering and bewildered people of Israel for the Promise Land. In the wilderness they learned how to survive. In the wilderness they learned to see things they didn't know existed in such a barren place.

They found manna and meat in abundance. They found water hidden in rocks.

We may call those supernatural miracles but we don't have to. We can call them human discoveries of amazing grace, discoveries of life-giving resources concealed in the world just waiting to be revealed.

It's true: life is hard, sometimes very, very hard. But something else is true: grace abounds. We only need eyes to see and hearts to believe. Sometimes it takes a wilderness for us to discover grace.

Lent is the season of wilderness. The wilderness is a bewildering and frightening place to be.

But Lent leads to Easter.

The tomb of death becomes the womb of new birth. A flower arises out of a bulb. A butterfly soars out of a cocoon. And a bold and fearless community arises out of despair.

We can't avoid the wilderness any more than we can avoid the valley of the shadow of death. There's no way round it. We must go through. And the best way through is with companions.

In this impending wilderness we will hold the Christ light for each other. I will be with you on the first steps of this journey. And, then, you will need each other to see that journey through.

I know you will. I made it through once when I never thought I would.

In September of 1973, 44 years ago, I was ordained in So. California as a minister of the Presbyterian Church. Nine months later, the world I counted on was shattered. I left California and entered a wilderness of sorts. I was all alone.

Starting in June and over the next 40 days or so, I journeyed up the west coast, into Canada, across the Canadian Rockies, back into the United States through North Dakota and onto my parents' house in Youngstown, Ohio. I was home, but not really.

In September I went off to Europe. I hitchhiked, rode trains, camped and stayed in youth hostels in Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Yugoslavia. I didn't find what I was looking for. I had become a broken down drifter with no direction home.

In November I returned to the United States. I hunkered down for a few days with a friend in Washington DC and then rode off to visit my parents for Thanksgiving. On the way I took a road less traveled. I took a long and winding road, crossed over the Potomac and Shenandoah and into West Virginia, a state I'd never seen before.

And then something happened.

Alongside old route 340 I saw a sign in front of a farmhouse: ROOM FOR RENT. On a whim, I rented the room. I didn't know what I wanted or where I was going. I just knew I was tired of drifting.

I took a job in an apple orchard near Charles Town. I took up my pruning tools, working day after day in cold, snow and wind. During those long, dark days old friends arrived out of the blue from hither and yon to camp out in my room while checking out historic Harpers Ferry, the Charles Town Races and Antietam. I'm not even sure how they found me.

It would take me years to realize those old friends were angels come to comfort me in my hour of darkness. As it turns out, I wasn't nearly as alone as I had thought.

And then one day I stepped out of the wilderness and into the Promise Land we know as SPC. Little did I know that Promise Land would soon become even more promising. Paula came into my life and stayed.

And just like that a new world full of grace, hope and beauty was revealed. I guess you could say: I found what I'd been looking for in more ways than one.

I've been in the wilderness more than once. I know you have, too. We all have. It's a frightening place to be. Fear not, says the Beloved. Do not be afraid. You are not alone.

Once upon a time, Jesus walked into a wilderness. He was tested to the core of his being only to discover that the angels of heaven were right there with him.

We can't avoid the wilderness any more than we can avoid the valley of the shadow of death. There's no way round it. We must go through. And the best way through is with companions.

Today we are each in our own way on the threshold of a wilderness. I know it won't be easy. So you must—and I know you will—hold the Christ light for each other until you see this journey through.

And wherever I may be as you make that journey, you can count on this: I will be holding the Christ light for you.

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Hymn 727
"The Servant Song"

Will you let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I might have the grace
To let me be your servant too

We are pilgrims on the journey
We're together on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load

I will hold the Christ light for you
In the night time of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear.