

Sermon 1st Sunday Lent Year B 2023 (All Saints’); Gospel Mark 1: 9-15

*“Please be seated”*

### **The Wilderness of Lent: Discovering Our True Selves**

Several years ago Father Marshall Craver and I decided to take a journey into what we hoped would be a true wilderness experience. Many of you know Marshall. He has since retired as a parish priest, and now does Spiritual Direction in our diocese. He is one of my closest friends. The adventure upon which we embarked was a kayak trip into the Mobile/Tensaw Delta. It wasn’t just any kayak journey, because we decided that we wanted to see the delta in the darkness of night. It was late afternoon when we drove with our kayaks strapped in the bed of his pickup truck, heading out of Spanish Fort along highway 225, north across I-65, then reaching our launch site called Rice Creek. The sun was setting, the light slowly disappearing, the sky slowly darkening. It was the spring of the year, warm enough to keep us from freezing and also late enough in the year for the snakes and alligators to have left their hibernation to re-enter the waters of that remote wild place which is their home. Our intention was to enter into this wilderness open to whatever we might encounter there, not knowing what we would find, but our intention and hope was for some type of spiritual experience. I’d say there was also an underlying current of anxiety and even a little fear. And sure enough, not long after entering the water we floated past an alligator resting on the sandy beach, watching us as we paddled through a narrow canal on our way toward the Tensaw River. I remember thinking: Is this a harbinger of what we might encounter out here tonight? We knew the route we would take through the waters, having made this trip several times before, but always during daylight. It is completely different at night. We paddled slowly through the dark water as the shadows lengthened, the trees taking on a new somewhat ominous appearance as they moved with the breeze; the sounds of the delta—the gentle breeze, the tree branches swaying, the water itself moving beneath our paddles and kayaks as they broke the surface, the occasional bird

flying overhead. We spent about two hours heading to our destination, which was Jug Lake, where we hoped to find one of the floating platforms provided for such adventures along the upper Bartram canoe trail. The only humans we saw were one another, and very few words were spoken. Yet the delta was fully alive. We could sense it, and as we floated through this ever-darkening wonderland we slowly became aware that while in one sense we were visitors, we were also a part of it, no more and no less so than its usual inhabitants. In the stillness and quietude we became one with it. It was truly a contemplative experience, a silent realization that this wilderness was our home too. Somehow we found the platform, tied up the kayaks, laid out our pads and sleeping bags, and using our flashlights found our sandwiches and water bottles, ate quietly, and then settled in for the night, wondering among other things whether I would wake up with a water moccasin sharing my sleeping bag. I don't remember how well we slept, but I do remember awakening in the heart of creation that night, a moonless night so that the stars became brilliant through the overhanging trees, their reflections shimmering on the water, the chatter of insects in the darkness. It was a perfect time for reflecting upon and thinking about all sorts of things, but as the time went by out there in the dark that night, I realized that it had become prayerful, and by prayerful I mean I had a sense of connection to something greater, something awesome, a sense of union with God maybe. And it opened me up to ask questions, questions like who am I in the grand scheme of creation? And also to look at my life. Where have I been so far? Where am I now? And where was I headed next? And then where has God been in all of it? A wilderness experience can do that for us.

There are some similarities between entering a wilderness and entering the season of Lent. Dr. Gerald May, now deceased psychiatrist and contemplative theologian, in his book [The Wisdom of Wilderness](#) has a lot to say about wilderness. He says that wilderness is not just a place, but also a state of being. The primary meaning of the root word "wild" is "natural", meaning "to be

born.” So, wilderness can refer not only to the nature we find outdoors. It can also refer to our own true nature, in other words who we really are. In Lent we are called to look for that true nature. Dr. May said that for him it is in places of solitude and silence that he experienced what he called “The Power of the Slowing,” a wild loving Wisdom that was both a healing presence and his direct connection to God. It healed his sense of separation from his own wildness, healed what he sensed to be a separation from his true nature. It helped him discover his true self. I think that on the platform beneath the stars in the Delta that night, I too experienced something like that Power of the Slowing.

Our reading from Mark today says something about wilderness. Mark’s Gospel moves quickly. In these seven short verses today Jesus travels from Nazareth to the Jordan River, is baptized by John, receives the Divine Favor, is driven by the Spirit into the desert, and begins his ministry, saying “The Kingdom of God has come near.” There is a lot going on, but typical of Mark there are few details. For instance, all we know about his time in the wilderness is that he was there for 40 days, was tempted by Satan, was with wild beasts, and that angels waited on him. Unlike in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, in Mark there is no debate between Jesus and the devil. Why was Jesus so quickly driven out into the wilderness, to be alone and to be tempted? Did God think this was a necessary part of the transformation of Jesus? Whatever it was that happened to Jesus in that desert, he left having resisted any temptations he may have faced, and returned with conviction that God’s kingdom or reign was near, and I would guess also with a better understanding of who he truly was.

Are you familiar with the expression “Whistling in the Dark?” I think it means that when we find ourselves uncertain or fearful in the dark, in the wilderness—in those times when we can’t see the light—we react by whistling, doing something to distract us from what seems threatening, trying to remain brave and convince ourselves that the situation is not as bad as it seems. Frederick Buechner wrote a book titled Whistling in the Dark, in which he says

faith is a kind of whistling in the dark because it helps to give us courage and to hold the shadows at bay. He says that to whistle in the dark isn't to pretend that the dark doesn't sometimes scare the living daylights out of us. Instead it is to demonstrate, if only to ourselves, that not even the dark can quite overcome our trust in the ultimate triumph of the Light. One of the reflections in Buechner's book is on Lent. In it he says that during his time in the wilderness Jesus must have asked himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent Christians are encouraged to ask what it means to be themselves.

We have once again entered into the season of Lent, those 40 days between Ash Wednesday and the Easter Vigil, a time which mirrors the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert. Much like Advent is a time for preparation for Christmas, Lent is a time for the spiritual preparation for Easter. We traditionally think of Lent as a time to reflect upon our own mortality. But the word Lent is from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning springtime, a time for new life and new birth. Just take a look outside now, and you will see it. Things are greening up, plants flowering, birds and animals more active. So, it is also a time to reflect upon things new. It is a time to pause and reflect, to examine our lives, to let go of the old and take on the new, to become aware of the things that distort our true nature and distract us from God, a time for discovering our true selves.

As you know one of our traditions in Lent is to fast or give up something, the thinking being that giving up something old will make room for something new, something perhaps more spiritual. I've never really understood how giving up chocolates or beer or meat could do that, but I'll admit that I've tried, with little success. Perhaps that approach works for you. Rather, I think taking on something new this Lent might be a better approach, and what I will do is to find a way each day to spend more time with God in the natural world. That is a form of prayer, and prayer is one of the pillars of Lent. Prayer might be but is not necessarily asking God for more things, or for things to happen or not happen, or even for talking to God with words. For me prayer is anything that provides a

sense of God being present, of somehow being nearer to God, ultimately with the hope of recognizing our unity with all created things in God. Prayer might be with words, but it may also be in silence and in awareness. It is an experience of God. The time Marshall and I spent in the delta wilderness, the times Dr. May encountered the “Power of the Slowing,” and Frederick Buechner’s “whistling in the dark” were all experiences that somehow united us to God. That is prayer, prayer in and through which I think we got a little closer to our true selves. The prayer that I will undertake and that I suggest you consider this Lent is to experience God in the natural world. GCCC has a 40 day Lenten challenge named “Re-connecting with the natural world,” each day with an idea for encountering God in creation. It may be on a walk, working in your garden, or simply sitting on your porch watching the birds or squirrels, but always with the intention of sensing God’s presence in the wildness of the out of doors.

Brian McClaren puts it something like this: “Wilderness constitutes solitude and silence, where you get away from the crowds of the city. You get away from the noise of the texts and the emails, the noise of the expectations of your social circle, the noise and pressure of your to-do lists and duties and responsibilities and roles. In this place of solitude and silence you’re able to hear what is very hard to hear in a lot of our lives—your own inner voice. This is a contemplative place where we learn to slow down and descend beneath the superficialities and try to hear what’s happening deep inside us, which simultaneously is the voice of our deepest truest self and the voice and presence of God.”

Yes, just as it was for Jesus, Lent is a time for discovering who we truly are, our true selves. Where have you been? Where are you now? Where do you sense you are called to go? And where has God been in it? Listen to your life. Together let’s take this journey into Lent and see where it leads us.

