



THE WILDERNESS PLACES OF LIFE
Exodus 16:9-15; Matthew 14:13-21

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I could tell that he was low as he came into my study. He slumped down into the seat near my chair, and said: "Pastor, I have never felt so low in all my life. As you know, I have not worked now for twelve months. I have tried desperately to find a job, but no one seems to want to hire someone who is 59 years old. We've gone through our life savings. What do I do now?" This man was in what I would call one of the wilderness places of life. He was in that place where every single one of us sooner or later will find in his or her life. We can never avoid them totally, finally, or completely. Some of you this morning may find yourself in one of these wilderness places. You may be there right now. Some of you have been. Others of you will be in the near future. But let me assure you of one thing: Every single one of us will find himself or herself at some point in life in some kind of wilderness.

Now I do not know what kind yours might be. It can take many shapes and many forms. Let me suggest a few wildernesses which I have seen. Some of you may know these too well. For some, you may sense your own wilderness in those I suggest. There are many others.

The Wilderness of Failure

One of the wilderness places that some people find themselves in is what you and I might call, "the wilderness of failure." Life often teaches us rather early an unfortunate lesson: We are never supposed to fail at anything we ever try. That is a bad lesson to be taught, because it is simply not true. Every single one of us, if he or she is honest, will have to confess that there are things in life which we have wanted to do that we have not quite pulled off like we wanted to. There are things that we have tried desperately to do and we really have failed at our attempts to succeed. There is a young teenager who desperately wants to make the football team. So he begins doing everything possible. He works hard at all the exercises. He practices throwing, kicking, running, and everything that goes with the game. He eats; he trains, he sleeps well. But then when the players are selected for the team, he is cut. He does not make it. There is a young lady who wants to make straight A's in high school so she can go to the college of her first choice. She studies hard, long into the night, and carefully does every assignment. But when she gets her report card, it still

has B's and C's. She tried, but could not achieve it.

There is a man who climbs up the ladder in business. He wants to be number one in business, and so he works hard to reach the top, but when he gets to a certain spot; he suddenly discovers that there is a host of other folks also climbing up the same ladder. And he finds that after awhile he has reached a certain point and cannot go further. A young woman has attempted to make her way in the business world only to find one door after another close in her face.

All of us carry around with us some "bag of dreams" which we hope some day we can realize. But all of us have dreams which have never been fulfilled, aspirations, hopes, and desires that have never totally and finally been realized. That is true for all of us. Some of us are like that man who said, "Here I am, 54 years old, and I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up." There are too many of us like that, because we have tried one thing and we have not quite succeeded or made it. We tried another thing over here and did not quite realize what we wanted. Life finds us sometimes in a wilderness which is surrounded by different kinds of failures.

The Wilderness of Guilt

For some of us, the wilderness may take a different turn, and it may be "a wilderness of guilt." Who among us has not said or done things that quickly and immediately we wish we could retract? We say something to another person and the word is in the stream of life. It has penetrated into that other person, and we wish for anything that we could grab it and pull it back. But it has gone into that person's life. It has been said, and we cannot stop it. It has hurt, cut, stabbed, and wounded like a knife. We feel the black and blue marks left by the stinging words of criticism, rebuke, insult, and gossip. Then, we live with a sense of guilt for having said it. It hurt someone, and we know it hurt, but we cannot retract it. There are things in the past which we have said or done. There are sins and acts for which we ourselves have never really been able to forgive ourselves. They may be things we have said to our husband, our wife, our children, or our friends. They could be deeds we have done in the wilderness, or in the quietness, or in the brightness of day or the loudness of the crowd, or in a moment, or carefully planned, or in desperation, or in anxiety, or in frustration. From then we have deep within us a lingering sense of guilt for which we have never heard the words come to us, "You are forgiven!" The late theologian Paul Tillich said that each of us must learn "to accept his acceptance by God."² We must learn to accept God's acceptance and forgiveness of us.

Many of us live with a heavy load of guilt in our lives. We could symbolize it in the following image. Our guilt is like a huge chain stretched far behind us, and on it would be linked all of the junk in our lives: Old trash cans, an old sink, old tires, garbage cans, refuse, and pieces of every kind of trash. We have never heard the

words, deep down inside of us, which say: “You are acceptable and you are forgiven.” Some of us continue to live with an agonizing sense of guilt. That is our wilderness.

The Wilderness of Loneliness

For others, “our wilderness is loneliness.” The woman looked up at me as I left the nursing home and she said, “Pastor, come back soon.” I was the only person other than her doctor and nurses who ever came into her room. She had no family, no friends. She lived in a world of constant loneliness. “Come back, Pastor, soon.” There are many people who go day after day to the mailbox, looking for a letter from a child, or a friend, or a parent. There is a young man overseas, there is a young girl off to college, or someone who lives in another state and they are living constantly in a sense of loneliness while they eagerly wait to hear a word from home, or to receive a letter, or a telephone call, or to hear someone saying in some way or another: “You count as a person, and I remember you, and care about you.”

There are those who sit across the table from an empty chair. There is a loved one who has been in their lives for so many years who is no longer there. Now they live with the loneliness of not having this companion. Oh, this is not just the problem of older folks, either. I was pastor of a college church where a university was just two blocks away. When I preached on loneliness once in that church, I was invited to come to the college campus the next week to speak because of the loneliness which many college students were constantly wrestling with. It is also a problem for teenagers. Some of us, who have gotten older, forget that it was hard to be a teenager. It seems that there is no one who really seems to understand you. Your parents do not seem to understand you; your friends do not understand you, and you do not understand yourself sometimes. And so it is tough growing up, and sometimes it is lonely to be a teenager. A teenager came home almost in tears from her first day in a new school in a large city. She had just moved from a small city, where she had lived for many years. She looked up at her mother and exclaimed: “This has been the loneliest day of my life.” But it is also lonely and tough to be the parents of teenagers. John Killinger has also written a striking book about *The Loneliness of Children*.³ We have all known loneliness, and we reach out for some kind of security blanket to put around ourselves to feel warmth and comfort.

The Wilderness of Grief, Suffering and Death

For others of us, the experience of “the wilderness is grief, suffering, pain, or death.” None of us escapes this wilderness. Every single one of us, sooner or later, walks through that dark valley. We cannot escape it. It is there. I was a pastor too long. I walked in too many hospital corridors. I have embraced too many people in their moment of grief. I have sat by too many bedsides and have seen young and old

slip from this life. I have seen the experience of grief, denial, frustration, anger, hostility, and acceptance and other emotions, as people have wrestled with the valley of the shadow of death. Grief has brought to us that choking feeling, the desire to run, to scream, to cry, and to faint. An empty feeling has pulled at us within our stomach. We have had a sinking feeling and felt we were out of control.

I remember his face well. He was one of our bright-eyed teenagers. He was a young man, when you thought you had answered all of the questions in the youth group, who would then raise his hand and say: “Pastor, I’ve got one more question.” He would always ask the penetrating questions for which nobody had the simple answers. He seemed to be so bright-eyed, full of hope, alive with possibility for making rich contributions to society and his church. But then at a football game in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he stepped from behind a bus into the pathway of an oncoming car and was killed instantly.

I remember standing in the pulpit on one occasion, looking into my congregation, and seeing seated before me a middle-aged couple with their nine-year old, blond haired daughter. She was the only child they had ever been able to have. They could have no other children. And now she was dying with leukemia.

Grief and suffering break into our lives in so many ways. Just a few weeks ago, my wife and I were in a hospital visiting a young couple whose three month old child had an incision across his body because he had cancer. We do not think the child will live. The parents are heartsick. It is not easy to walk through this kind of wilderness.

Some of you have lost a mother or father or a grandparent. Others have known the sadness of the death of a wife or husband or a child. The shadow of death has crossed all our paths at some time or will. I remember persons whom I met in a hospital corridor and had to say to them, “Sit down. I have some bad news for you. Your husband just had a heart attack.” The reality of the wilderness of grief, suffering, and death is there for every single one of us to walk through at some point or another.

The Wilderness of Rejection

For some of us the wilderness is “rejection.” I suppose one of the hardest things for a young person is to wait for sides to be chosen on the playground, and always to be chosen last. Just think—you know you will always be chosen last. What a sense of rejection! Some of us feel rejection in so many places in life. We learn early that there are some places folks do not want us. We are not welcome. There are “keep-out” signs that say: “Don’t come in here.” It is hard when we feel that we do not measure up to some body else’s image. We are not tall enough for their occasion. It is difficult to live when we feel rejected here or there in life. Do you know what the

two most stolen books in the New York City Public Library are? Number one is Emily Post. This book tries to tell us how to get along with other people. The other one is the Holy Bible. In desperation some people reach out to find some way how to relate more effectively with others and God. Why? Because of the awful fear of rejection.

I do not know what kind of wilderness you may be walking through in your life today. Maybe the wildernesses which I mentioned are not your particular ones, or maybe they are. Many feel trapped in a dead-end street with nowhere to turn. Their yearnings are unfulfilled. Their hopes are broken like a discarded toy on a sandy beach. Their dreams have vanished. Their bodies are fatigued and their minds disturbed. They long for direction. Many walk through wildernesses of drugs, alcoholism, depression, mental illness, divorce, and many others. Sooner or later, all of us walk through a wilderness of some kind. Now then, is there any word that comes from God to use in the wilderness that gives us hope and help? I think there is, and insight for this direction comes from the passage we read this morning. I want to share with you very briefly some points that give us direction from those passages.

The Setting of the Biblical Texts

Capture the setting of these scripture passages for a moment. The children of Israel knew about wildernesses. They had wandered through one for forty years. They had known hard, lean days. Their cries went against Moses and they longed for food to eat, even if it was given by Pharaoh's men and they had to return to slavery. "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Ex. 16:3). God told Moses to lead the people to the Sinai Peninsula and he would provide for them there. He provided meat for them in the quails which came that way as a part of their regular migratory pattern. The bread which God provided was found in the manna which was geographically limited to the Sinai Peninsula. Manna was a sweet secretion of a local plant which is still found today in that region. When the Israelites first saw it they cried: "Man-ha"—"manna"—"what is it?" This fine, flake-like substance was the bread which the Lord had provided for Israel. This bread came to them in their wilderness experience as a sign of the providence of God.

Turn now to the New Testament story. Jesus has just received word that John the Baptist has been beheaded. Luke tells his readers that Herod wanted to kill Jesus as well as John, because Jesus had been openly criticizing him. Jesus departs to escape Herod. On this particular day, Jesus had been teaching a long time. He was frustrated and frightened by what had happened to John. Jesus instructed his disciples to go

across the Sea of Galilee to a “desert place” on the other side so he might find some rest. But the Sea of Galilee is a small sea, as seas go. It is only thirteen miles long and eight miles across. When the people saw that Jesus was going to the other side, some quickly got in their boats and started toward the other side. Some of them probably hiked around the lake. When he got to the other side, Jesus saw the great host of people waiting for him there in that wilderness place. He had compassion on them; taught them, and healed the sick.

Late into the day, his disciples said, “Master, you had better send this crowd away, because there is nothing to eat.” And Jesus said: “Feed them yourself.” And they said, “We do not have anything, Lord. The only thing in this whole crowd that we have found to eat is the sack lunch of a young boy.” Jesus said, “Bring it to me. It is enough.” He blessed it. He broke it. And he fed the multitude. From these experiences, it seems to me there are some lessons we can learn about how to live in the wilderness. I want to mention a few of these.

No One Escapes the Wilderness

The first lesson is this. Learn to expect to spend some time in the wilderness. The nation Israel knew that the journey to freedom would be difficult. They had to go through a wilderness to get to the Promised Land. And so may you and I. Jesus withdrew to a lonely place. This lonely place has been translated “desert” or “wilderness” in some translations. Jesus knew that other wildernesses lay before him. His hour of conflict was coming. The agony of his rejection, suffering, and death were drawing nearer. Jesus was not surprised when he found himself in a wilderness. In this wilderness place on the other side of the lake, even when he attempted to escape to be apart, he was met by people and their needs. Even in the wilderness, he attempted to help others in their time of need.

Most of us act surprised when we end up sometimes in the wilderness. Why should we be amazed at that? When sometimes I stay up late working on sermons or articles I am writing or I stay up late talking to someone, and miss several good nights of sleep, I should not be surprised when my body is tired, my eyes are bloodshot, and have huge bags under them. I should expect that, because that is the kind of abuse which comes from misusing one’s body. Some of us who overeat, over drink, under exercise, and over indulge, why should we be surprised when we become ill and too tense? Why should we blame God all the time, as though it is something which God has done to us? We ask: “Why did God do this to me?” We know full well it is something we should expect from what we ourselves have done to our bodies. It is strange, isn’t it, that we expect to go through life with only comfort, convenience, joy, and happiness. We act surprised if any difficult spot ever comes at all.

One of my favorite theologians is Charles Schultz. If you do not know the theologian Charles Schultz, let me introduce him. He is the one who writes the Peanuts comic strip. In one of the Peanuts comic strip, Charlie Brown and Lucy are engaged in conversation. Charlie Brown is telling Lucy his philosophy of life, and he says: "You know, life sometimes has its ups and its downs. Sometimes we're up and sometimes we're down." And Lucy, putting her hand on her hips, says: "Well, why should it be like that? Why should life sometimes be up and sometimes down? Why can't we go from one up to another up? And why can't I go from that up to an even higher up? And from that up, just up, up, up? And Charlie Brown walks off, saying: "Good grief. I can't stand it."

There are too many of us in life who want to live like Lucy. We expect life always to be lived on the mountaintops, and never to have to walk in the valleys. We expect to go through life always with balmy, beautiful weather. We do not anticipate any storm, or excessive heat. The weather of life will always be cool and nice. But life has its storms and its difficulties. They are a part of life, and we need to learn to expect them. It rains on the just and the unjust. After Jesus was baptized, and his Father said: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," Jesus was immediately taken into the wilderness and experienced temptation. Even our Lord experienced times in the wilderness. He also warned his disciples that they would experience many kinds of wilderness experiences (Mark 13:9ff). So, we need to learn to expect these wildernesses as a part of life and not be surprised when they confront us.

Use the Resources Around You

Second, we need to learn to use the resources which we have around us. Moses was instructed by God to eat of the migratory quail and to partake of the manna which was found on the Sinai Peninsula. He used the resources at hand. God's special blessing is often linked with our use of natural surroundings. Notice that Jesus asked his disciples:

"What have we got to eat in this crowd?" They said: "Only one lunch." Jesus said: Bring it to me. This is enough." Then he took the small loaves and the few fish, blessed them, and he distributed them to the disciples and the disciples to the people. And the multitude was fed. No matter how meager our resources, God will bless their use. I think that God expects us, when you and I get in our wildernesses in life, first of all, to see what resources we have! It is amazing what resources you and I do have. So often, we simply give up and say: "Oh, woe is me," or "Ain't it awful?" We do not try to find what resources we already have at hand. God is expecting you to use your mind, and your heart, and your strength, and whatever other means you have. For some who have lost their hearing, they may have learned to use their eyes

and their hands better. For those who have lost their hearing, they may have learned to use their eyes and their hands better. For those who have lost their sight, they may have learned to use more effectively their ears and their hands. For those who have lost both, they may have learned to use other senses.

Let me give you an example of a beautiful woman in one of my former congregations. She was crippled with arthritis. She had to remain in a wheelchair and could almost never come to church. She seldom was able to go many places at all. I tried to visit her as often as I could, in order to give her some word of encouragement. When I would knock on her door, she would greet me, fling open the door, and then, with a smile say: “Pastor, come in and let me tell you what I’ve been doing.” Then she would proceed to tell me what she had been busy doing since I last saw her. She told me about the telephone calls she had made to cheer up people who were sick and lonely; the letters she had written to college students; and cards she had mailed to people who were shut-ins; the bulletin articles, the pastor’s paragraphs, excerpts from sermons, quotations from books and readings which she had shared with other people. She was crippled with arthritis; she could not walk; she could not leave home very often. But she was able to use the resources she had: The telephone, the pen, the letter, the gift of kindness, an understanding heart and a joyful spirit. She was a radiant personality who had learned to use whatever limited resources she had. Whatever kind of wilderness we are in, God expects us to learn to use the resources around us and within us.

God Is Concerned About Our Needs

Third, notice that both of these biblical accounts tell us about a God who is concerned with the bodily needs of persons. God was moved by the hunger of the Israelites, and Jesus had compassion on the crowd and fed them. God is aware of your hunger, pain, hurt, and other human needs. God is not interested in just your soul but with your total person—body, soul, and mind. Your physical needs are important to God as they are real and significant to you. Jesus reminded us of God’s care when he taught us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Although Jesus refused to perform miracles of turning stones into bread to meet his own personal need, he did perform a miracle to feed the multitude. He has also reminded us that we have an obligation, no matter how small our resources are, to feed those who are without. “In as much as we do it unto one of the least of these,” we have done it unto him. God cares about our needs, and he challenges us to care for the needs of others.

You May Learn Something About Yourself

Fourth, when you find yourself in the wilderness, the amazing thing is that you might learn something about yourself that you have never learned before. Jesus

instructed the disciples to feed the people. They found they were unable to do so. They discovered their own inadequacies. In some of the translations of this New Testament passage from the Greek, it has been rendered that Jesus called his disciples to come apart to the wilderness “by yourselves.” But the Greek word is “for yourselves.” In this wilderness experience and this lonely place he reminds them, you may find out something about yourself that teaches you a lesson which you have never really known before. While they were in the wilderness for forty years, the nation Israel learned about God’s faithfulness, his judgment, and covenant love. It was while they were in the wilderness that they were bound firmly into a nation.

Do you know that sometimes God can only teach us lessons in the wilderness? That, unfortunately is the only place some of us ever learn them. In the brightness of the sunshine and in the joy of life, we almost seem to be unteachable. He can not penetrate our thick skins and hard hearts. He has a difficult time communicating with us. I have learned in the churches where I have pastured to send a person, who has had a grief experience and effectively come through it, to talk to someone else who has a similar grief experience. After they have found the healing power of Christ, they can go to another and say: “We understand.” And they really do! They have been in that wilderness, and now they know what it is like, and they can help another find his or her way through it. Those who have known what it is to be lonely can understand the loneliness of others. Those who have know difficulties, frustration, sinfulness, guilt, forgiveness, and restoration can talk to others who have not yet found the path which Christ gives through this kind of wilderness. Those who have found the presence of God in the wilderness can communicate that message now to others.

I read about a dream a woman had several years ago. In her dream, she saw a huge Christmas tree which stretched high into the heavens. She noticed that the tree was loaded down with all kinds of gifts and presents. She turned to figure standing by her, who represented God, and asked: “Who are all these presents for?” “They are the gifts I wanted to give you in life,” God responds, “but you were always too busy and preoccupied to receive them.” Too often, we are busy, and God cannot touch our lives. Sometimes it is only in the wilderness where God can get our attention. There is an old Eastern tradition which has turned one of our American sayings upside-down, and it goes like this: “Stop doing something; just stand there!” Some of us are never still long enough to hear God who wants to come into our Lives. We never seek him until we are in some kind of wilderness. He wants to speak to us in our joy and in the light, and he is certainly present there. But some of us cannot hear him in the light. It is only when we come into the darkness, when our resources are so few, that some of us hear him.

May Meet God in the Wilderness

Finally, the most important message which is being taught in these Scripture passages is this: In the wilderness, we may meet God himself. The Bible has many images of our God. One of the great images is the image of host. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." It is the God who fed the children of Israel as they wandered in their wilderness for forty years. He was the host who provided for their needs. Manna has become a metaphor for God's grace and providence. In Matthew's miracle story, which all the other gospel writers record, we are told that Jesus Christ meets us as the host in the wilderness experiences of life. God had fed Israel in the wilderness. The covenant which God made with Israel had been sealed by a meal. The feeding of the multitude in the wilderness by Jesus was a sign of the Messianic Banquet for which all of Israel longed. The meal also had Eucharistic images of the Last Supper because Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and they to the people. John's gospel makes the symbolic message plainer: Jesus is himself "the bread of life." He is the one who feeds us and meets our basic needs. The "how" of the multiplication of the bread and fish cannot be explained scientifically. But, the miracle or "sign" is accepted as a part of the tradition of the early church. The story points us to the one who is God's Messiah. "He who comes to me," Jesus said, "shall never hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). In the wilderness, you and I may meet God. God comes to us, and you and I can feast upon his presence and find the power to go on.

The Scriptures do not tell us that God will keep us from getting into all kinds of wildernesses. You are not told that you may never be lonely, frustrated, depressed, grieve, or have other difficulties. But God tells us this: That there is absolutely nothing which can separate us from him, when we are in Christ Jesus. There in the wilderness God comes to sustain us. When we walk through the dark valley, we are not alone, but we walk through it with the power and the presence of the God of the universe. In the wilderness places of life, you and I can meet God. He is seeking to come to us, to sustain us, comfort us, and strengthen us.

A number of years ago on the southern coast of Wales, a man had reached the low point of his life, and he was at the point of committing suicide. He sat alone on the shore watching the waves as they broke on the sand and the rocks. Finally he decided there was only one option open to him. He had lost his marriage, his money, his ministry, and his faith. At one time, he had been a noted journalist and a minister, but now everything that he had ever loved and held dear had collapsed. He sat in the sand, feeling that he was a dismal failure. He threw himself into the water and began to swim out into the darkness of the night to let the waves swallow him. This was his way to commit suicide. Suddenly after he had been swimming a great distance, he cried: "Good God! What am I doing?" He turned around in the water and struggled

back to the shore and collapsed on the sand in a convulsion of weeping. His mind flashed back to the times when he was a small boy, and his mother tried to teach him about God. She would open the small Catechism book and ask him: "Who is Jesus Christ?" And he found himself responding out loud: "Jesus Christ is my Savior." Suddenly, he said, a deep peace settled over him. There, where D. R. Davies had least expected to find God, in his own agony, he met him. "In the final anguish, hovering between life and death, I found myself, as I was, and in my utter nakedness and worthlessness I found God."¹

Many of us, in the midst of the wilderness places of life, may find that God comes into our life as never before. Now again I remind you that God is always trying to come to us in the bright, beautiful days, so we might sense his presence. But be assured of this:

Whatever wilderness you are in now, or may be in the future, the great God of the universe, who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, is there with you and he is seeking to strengthen you and sustain you. He never leaves you alone in your wilderness. He is there with you! May God give you and me the strength and the insight to sense his presence.

¹ D. R. Davies, *In Search of Myself* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961) 189-190.

² Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 162

³ John Killinger, *The Loneliness of Children* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1980)