

**Mark 1:9-13**

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*

*The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

**1 Kings 19:1-13**

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." He got up and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."*

*He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.*

Last week we were on top of a mountain with Jesus, Elijah and Moses. This week we are in the wilderness. From the highest highs to the lowest lows. Now this doesn't follow chronologically. In Jesus' case the wilderness was long before the mountain, but

we are at the beginning of our Lenten journey, and that journey begins in the desert. It begins or maybe travels entirely through an inhospitable place. Lent invites us to become more familiar with the wilderness.

Mark's story of Jesus in the wilderness is, as usual, short on details. His wilderness experience is summed up in one verse: "He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

Jesus' story reminds us of other wilderness stories. It reminds us of Moses and the time the Israelites spent wandering around the wilderness complaining. It also reminds us of Elijah's time in the wilderness. Elijah, like Jesus, spent 40 days. (And forty doesn't mean exactly forty; it's a way of saying "a lot" or too many to count). Elijah had made some powerful enemies in the king and queen of Israel, and the queen vowed to have him killed. Running for his life, afraid, Elijah becomes exhausted and depressed. He isolates himself by going into the wilderness alone. Elijah is depressed enough to want to end his life. A little later on we hear Elijah complaining to God that he is the only one out there who is faithful to God. He lays down under a tree and asks God to take his life and falls asleep. He is weary of his life and weary of the weight of the calling of being a prophet.

What is the wilderness for us today? It's not likely a physical desert place with little water or food, but most of us have experienced the wilderness.

The wilderness is an unfamiliar place: like a diagnosis, a recent loss, a new and unwanted reality.

It is a place of struggle: like when it's one thing after another and you just can't catch a break. The car battery dies, you get a renovation notice, you end up with a bad flu, your Amazon order gets stolen by porch thieves, the news goes from bad to worse, and your sister won't talk to you and won't tell you why.

It is a place of weariness, like when you are a primary caregiver and you just don't have the energy and you've got your own health issues; or like when you are fighting for justice, for the world to care and take meaningful action on a ceasefire in Gaza or climate change or homelessness, and it seems like the more you do, the less things change. Like when you just can't. When getting out of bed and taking a shower sounds like too much work. So weary.

The desert or the wilderness is a place of isolation, where there seem to be few supports and fewer supporters.

Ever been in a wilderness? Of course you have. Some of you are there right now. Some of you could sing that song: "It's me, it's me Oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my mother, not my brother but it's me O Lord!"

When you choose to follow Jesus, it does not guarantee you will have an easy life or that your life will be free from challenges.

We talked a bit about that during our Lenten Ash Wednesday service. On Ash Wednesday we face our mortality as humans. We acknowledge that part of life, part of

being human involves pain, suffering and ultimately death. Rather than escaping from it, the major holy people, like Elijah and Moses and even Jesus, the son of God, went through times of suffering.

Jesus and Elijah end up in the wilderness through no fault of their own. It's not a place of punishment, neither 'deserves' to be there. In fact, it seems to be God's fault or the fault of choosing to follow God that they end up in a place that is physically and spiritually challenging.

So if you are in a painful season in your life, you are in good company.

When it comes to the wilderness, it is not a question of *if* but *when*. Often, we spend a lot of energy lamenting the space and the place. I'm not down on lament — lament is part of the grieving process. We can spend a lot of energy resisting the fact that we are in a time of struggle — a lot of time and energy in the *why me?* phase.

Perhaps we Christians are weird. (Actually, there's a very good chance of that!) But during Lent we intentionally go to the place of struggle, and we sit with it and try it on for 40 days. That's why people give things up for Lent. I had a joke on FB that said, "One year I gave up coffee for Lent and became 100% less like Jesus!" But giving something up or adding something in is hard to do, and it's a mini wilderness. Why would we want to intentionally go to the wilderness? Well, there are lessons to learn in the wilderness. We can go deeper and even grow in the wilderness. There is an opportunity to develop **resilience** in the desert.

Resilience is something we desperately need. Resilience is the ability to recover from hardship or difficulty. It's being able to spring back after you've been beaten down, or at least being able to get up and carry on.

So, what can the wilderness teach us?

It can teach us to discern the lies and the truth. When we are in a place of struggle, we often hear or tell ourselves lies. We tell ourselves that we are alone. We start to believe that we'll never get out of it — that this is how it will be from now on and that nothing good can come from it. The lie it tells is that *no one cares*. That God does not care, or God would get us out of it! That's what Elijah was starting to believe. He kept saying that he alone was faithful to God — and then in the very next section, after he meets God on the mountain, he goes and meets with 70 other prophets of God.

The truth is that Elijah was not alone. The truth is *God is present*. However, God's presence does not remove the suffering. God does not miraculously lift Elijah out of his difficult situation, and he certainly doesn't take Elijah's life as he has asked. But God comes to Elijah where he is, weary, depressed, propped up against a broom tree wanting to die — and provides him with sustenance. An angel wakes him up twice and says to him "Get up and eat!" When he wakes up, he finds bread and a jar of water. This gives Elijah the strength to go on, the strength to continue his flight from Jezebel. It wasn't much, but it was *enough* so that he could make it to the top of Mount Horeb.

That is a truth. That God is present. God does not always swoop in with plenty, but

God gives us *enough* so we can carry on.

The wilderness teaches us what Robert Frost wrote: that “the best way out is always through.”

The wilderness can teach us to trust. To trust that we will make it through. To trust that even when life is difficult, God is good. That we are not alone and that somehow, God gives us enough to carry on.

I love the detail of the angels that ministered to Jesus and to Elijah in the middle of their suffering. That word ‘minister’! I’m a minister and people in government are called ministers — but the word, especially as a verb, means to care for someone, to help someone. A minister is someone who cares and helps.

It would be nice if there were angels who appeared out of nowhere and gave us the money we needed to get to the end of the month or the strength or encouragement we needed to get through.

But don’t you find that often there is? Just not someone glowing in white and flying with wings. (Not that angels in the Bible actually look like that. but that’s what we picture!)

I have been struck recently with hearing stories from members of the congregation who have taken an interest in someone, in an individual and have come alongside them to help in a specific way. I’m not talking about one story or one individual — I’m talking about several totally different people and stories.

In each case there was a sense of call — a nagging sense that they should reach out to a particular person. Don’t ignore those nagging thoughts, especially if you have them while you are in a good space — (like your mind drifts while I’m preaching ...it happens!) ...and you think of someone. Sometimes when a person flits through my mind in prayer I know I just need to say a prayer for them, and sometimes the thought is stronger ... and I know I need to reach out.

Often, it’s the smallest thing that can give someone the courage to carry on. Friday at the breakfast a young woman who was likely living rough had the opportunity to go and look for a winter coat. She picked a pink winter coat and declared that she was so warm! I think that breakfast and things like the socks and coats that are provided are like the angels that give a little bread and a little water. It doesn’t solve the problem of homelessness or the rising cost of food, but it provides something that helps people get through today.

On that strength we carry on, back to places where we remember that we are not alone and were never alone.

It is a blessing if you recognize these angels while you travel through. But sometimes it’s only when we get through a struggle and look back that we see those blooms in the desert. May you experience the blessings in real time, may you look back on your journey and see ministering angels. And may you be that ministering angel to another.

Thanks be to God. Amen.