

Pastor Roy's Sermon from February 17, 2013

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13

In the wilderness Jesus takes time to separate the competing voices, to sift through his choices and priorities. Then he sets out to proclaim the Good News of God. He, and Paul, and Moses invite us to do likewise. So the challenge and opportunity of Lent is to sift all the voices and our own assumptions and invite God to speak to us.

John O'Donohue in a book called *Four Elements*, invites us to think of God as the greatest question in the universe—the answer to this Question is not easy, or simplistic. To quote him (p. 116), some “convert the passion, wildness, and danger of God as a question into a chided answer” which they proceed to “paste onto everything.” God as answer as opposed to question or invitation is limited, an idol, overly simplistic, stiflingly narrow.

I believe narrow views of God cause many to question God's existence. I'm sure that is where the “god is dead” movement got its energy. Such narrow understandings of god *need* to die—they are false. They fail to express the depth and breadth of Truth and Life. It is not our job to limit God. God speaks through our traditions in the Scriptures, through more recent traditions—such as the Lutheran Confessions and good books, and within our relationships. God is still speaking to us and no one can deny that the true God, the mighty lifegiving force of goodness and mercy in the universe is very much alive.

Jesus rediscovered God who had been buried by many in his day. Buried in customs which did not set free, but created bondage. Faith for some had become a conservative holding of power. Wealthy men held on to what they had at the expense of others. Their god always backed up their right to dominate and bless the prophets whom they approved and execute or imprison the ones who questioned their authority. Jesus threatened their power because he had opened himself to the freedom of the Spirit whom he met in the wilderness.

Today, some struggle to grasp the truth of God relating to us and end up forcing God into a box. It's tempting to reduce our relationship with God to a narrow truth. An example is the common emphasis on salvation in many churches. To say that the main goal of life is to be saved from and to get others to be saved is to miss the issue of justice in Jesus' Gospel. Yes, we are powerless to save ourselves, we are dependent on God who creates and sustains us. God *does* save us in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But this salvation is a broad salvation, a rich one which involves every facet of life. Salvation is not a quick 4 or 5 point prayer which “gets us right with God” so we can be ok in eternity. The grace of God is not cheap and it does not depend on our ability to make it happen. But it is just as false to say that God's grace does not demand a serious response on our part. There is always tension in every truth. The tension is balance. We must always have balance or we fall into idolatry and falsehood. Weighing these truths can only happen as we spend time in the wilderness with our Lord and the Spirit of our Lord.

God *is* passion, wildness and danger. Look at the life of Jesus. His courage to live gives us life, invites us to care deeply about the things that truly matter, to enter into the struggle of listening to the Holy Spirit who is anything but simplistic or manageable.

In the wilderness Jesus was reminded to let go of the temptation to use his power for meeting his own

desires and needs, the temptation to abuse political and religious power. The Spirit calls Jesus to let all these things go, to love mercy and kindness regardless of the cost.

Jesus totally gives himself over to the way of God as proclaimed in the law and by the prophets. This is not the way of self-righteousness, this is the way of mercy and compassion.

(p. 117) If we seek God as Jesus sought God in the wilderness, we will live this passion, yes there will be danger, and wilderness all around us. Letting ourselves go into God's grace and mercy force us to let go of our carefully managed selves. We confess our weakness and step into the life of the Spirit in the wilderness.

But the only way to live this way is to acknowledge the wilderness around us and allow the wildness of God's life to fill us. This will mean different things to different people. To some it involves spending time in a literal wilderness. For some it means visiting the wilderness of memories. For some it will be the wilderness of fear. For some the wilderness of needing to be in control as opposed to trusting God and others. For everyone wilderness is a matter of sitting still long enough to hear the voice of God however and wherever God tends to speak to us.

The wilderness will always demand we sacrifice our comfort zone and learn to trust while the Spirit invites us to dance the dance of mercy and compassion.

What is your wilderness? May we invite the Spirit to guide through the wilderness to learn and to trust. Amen.