

LENT IN OUR TIME: WILDERNESS MOMENTS

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Nagley at St.
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We read the bible and offer a sermon to bring past into present. Today, we traverse God's landscape from Eden paradise to the harsh wilderness of Jesus. These passages give us a rich and robust view of what it means to be human, and how we can live in the world with integrity and hope.

All of us have experienced, more often than we might like, wilderness moments and temptations.

The first reading from Genesis is often called "The Fall" of Adam and Eve. So 'true' is that telling of what it's like to be human that it's been the subject of paintings, music, literature, and film, for centuries upon centuries.

It's said that the story of Adam and Eve is about original sin but doubtful there is a cause and effect that renders us with its stain. Instead, the writers of that story are merely giving us in Adam and Eve a nod to the human condition, the pull and push of moving through life wanting the best, wanting to be the best and wanting to be faithful to God.

As the story goes, once upon a time, Adam and Eve had everything going for them. They wanted for nothing. They wanted for nothing and still they wanted. It was a wilderness moment.

A wilderness moment doesn't have to appear all that bad. We might seem that we have it all but still feel something is missing. Adam and Eve had it fine but they couldn't shake the feeling of being incomplete, insufficient and insecure.

Insufficiency and insecurity was just what the serpent needed to crawl into their hearts and get them to do the very thing God had asked them not to do. The serpent slithered up and slowly degraded the trust they had in God. "God", the serpent said, "has been holding out on you." "God hasn't told you everything and let you be everything you could be. Everything you ever needed is in the fruit of the tree of knowledge." As one preacher

put it, the serpent was able to probe their insecurity like a dentist probes a cavity.¹

That cavity, that longing, that sense of incompleteness that is such an Achilles heel of the human condition is what is laid out in the story of Adam and Eve. It's not their fault we're the way we are. We are the way we are and someone decided to tell us a story that made it easier for us to see.

Adam and Eve aren't to blame for this God sized hole in our psyche. It's something we're born with and we struggle to fill from birth to death.

Pascal the 17th century philosopher said we were born with a God shaped hole and that wasn't flaw but something that encourages us to keep connected to God.
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It's not original sin that's our problem so much as original insecurity and incompleteness that lead us to temptations. As Verna Dozier said, something wholly bad doesn't tempt us. ³What tempts us are those things that hold out the promise of making us feel better.

What tempted Adam and Eve and how the serpent moved in on them was the chance to get rid of their

¹ David Lose, Working Preacher <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1488>

² David Lose <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1488>

³ Verna Dozier *the Dream of God*

sense of incompleteness and to change original insecurity into perfect security as people who could be their own god and not have to depend on this God who was holding them back from perfect knowledge.

Moving through centuries and into the desert with Jesus that serpent appears again. This time it's called the devil. The devil tempts Jesus to question God and his loyalty to God. The Devil begins the temptations with the pernicious "if". If you are the Son of God, says the devil. That corrosive "if" enticing Jesus to go out on his own and define himself apart from God.

The serpent has slithered right out of that wilderness into ours. Think about what comes up for us as we go about our days that promises to fill the God shaped hole in us. What things entice us with the false promise of making us feel complete, secure and even invincible?

A few years ago PBS did a series called The Persuaders. It asked a similar question by examining the changes in advertising over the years. Where once advertising was aimed at convincing us of the quality of the product today it endeavors to convince us about the improvement in our lives a product will provide⁴.

If we buy a Lincoln, we'll be as cool as Matthew Mccoughney. If we get the new iPhone and its wireless

⁴ David Lose

ear buds, we'll be able to dance on ceiling and walls. It's not just a morning cup of coffee but a cup of coffee that brings enlightenment and world peace at 6 am.

Silly as all that may seem it does work. A new car isn't bad nor are wireless ear buds or the perfect cup of coffee. It's just that we're sold on something that can't give us what we most long for. We run the same temptation as Adam and Eve. We run the temptation of trusting that something other than God and our relationship to God will make us complete. The temptation is to define ourselves by what we have, or the title we hold, a collar around our necks or a wall displaying our degrees over who we really are and the value we have as God's beloved people.

Wilderness moments and temptations are not just about individuals. Wilderness moments come for communities and countries. We are confronted with national and global wilderness moments every day. Tearing down EPA. Compromising the best research, we have on global warming. Bulking up weaponry. Building a wall. Indiscriminately rounding up undocumented immigrants. The immigration ban. All designed to make us feel safer, more secure and complete. Then there is: ISIS terrorism and white supremacy,

antisemitism, racism and Islamophobia. All of that comes from the same place in our individual psyches. All of that comes from a deadly fear and insecurity, a fear and insecurity that bullies, belittles, lies or even kills in order to feel complete. Those four a.m. tweets of the president are prime examples of someone who deep down is profoundly insecure, incomplete and impotent.

All of it is a dance with the devil and a deal with the serpent. Anything that compromises our true humanity ultimately makes us less secure, and more fearful and makes the God size hole in us even bigger.

Going back into the wilderness with Jesus and looking back from there to Adam and Eve are two stories of contrast in humanity. Adam and Eve wanted to be safe and secure and complete so badly they crossed the line to be like God. Jesus, on the other hand, refused to cross that line. He would stay with humanity. He would risk being hungry in order to stand with the hungry. He would be less powerful so that he could stand with us and help us see the immutable power of God working in us and through us and with us.

The devil it is said left Jesus and waited for a more opportune time. So our wilderness moments never end. We're always tempted fill that hole in us with something other than God. We're always tempted to make

ourselves feel better, complete, secure by turning to something or someone other than God.

That's what it means to be truly human. We are tempted. But think of temptations are teachers, teachers that give us the opportunity to explore what it is we're longing for, where are insecurity lies and how it is pulling at us and what in us feels incomplete.

Lent is not about scotch or chocolate. Lent is not about proving you have the discipline and willpower to give something up for 40 days that would be like saying the wilderness journey of Jesus was as simple as passing up a piece of chocolate cake. Giving up something for lent is a worthwhile discipline if it helps confront the places that ache and the longing that exists and the need to reconnect with God.

Lent is not in what we're willing to let go of but what we're willing to live for.⁵ Lent is about hearing our lives, and seeing our circumstance and recognizing those things that draw away from God. The temptations that are the teachers may be in the glass of wine or a piece of cake. The teacher may come in the snarky criticisms and cynical comments. The teacher may be in wanting to denigrate someone's character rather than seeing the insecurity and fear that drives them and us apart.

⁵ Karoline Lewis <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4829>

Wilderness moments comes in all shapes and sizes. That's the good news and the bad news. The devil always returns at a more opportune time. But then that's the time we are given to discover who we are and to reconnect with the one who has called us the beloved people of God. This is our wilderness moment to come home, to come home to one who loved us to death and back again in order that we might fill that God shaped hole in our hearts.