

Not Condemned to Barrenness

Preached on The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
July 31, 2022
Text: Rom. 6: 19-23; Mk. 8: 1-9

In our Gospel this morning we again have a recalling of the history of the Israelites. The people who have come to hear Jesus are in the wilderness, bringing to mind the forty year trek of Israel to the Promised Land. As for their forebears, these auditors are not in a place of comfort or security. Indeed, another translation terms this location as a “desolate place.”

For many of us, however, the term “wilderness” might conjure a more romantic notion, a place remote and pristine, a place of quiet solitude and natural beauty, unspoiled and unsullied by traffic, strip malls, noise, and advertisements. A wilderness is where we can flee the stresses and strains of the workaday world and “get in touch with nature,” its cleansing freshness and rugged beauty. There we hope to be renewed and refreshed, to encounter what is most true and valuable. Though we might not articulate it this way, we seek an experience that can only be described as sublime.

This view is a far cry from the wilderness of The Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest literary work in human culture. There the wilderness lies outside the walled city, outside the human community and, in a way, threatens the city of man. The wilderness is the fearful uncertainty that lies beyond the relative safety of the city.

The Scriptures offer a more understanding of wilderness. There is the sense of the wilderness as the natural beauty of God’s creation—the mountains and the hills, the valleys and the plains, the wonder of such creatures like the monster of the deep, Leviathan, whom he made for the sheer pleasure of it. There is the power of the thunderstorm, the sea and the order of the seasons. The natural world reveals the glory of God. “God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good.” In its created truth and being, creation as wilderness is not a place of fearful uncertainty; instead, it is emphatically and essentially “very good”.

But the Scriptures also see the wilderness as the place of wildness and alienation. It is a place of danger, hunger, and thirst. It also represents the world of fallen humanity. For the wilderness is not simply a physical place—barren, isolated, remote—it is also a spiritual place spiritually. It arises from within us. The created order becomes a wilderness because of our rebellion against God and his order. We make the created order a wilderness by virtue of our sin and presumption.

This situation is described in the Epistle and Gospel for today. The Biblical insight is that the wilderness without arises from the wilderness within. But that is not the whole story. We are not condemned to alienation and hopelessness. We are not forlorn, doomed to seek sustenance where little can be found. For in the Scriptures we are given

a further image: divine provision for us in the wilderness of our disobedience. God does not abandon us in the wilderness even though we have so often rejected him. He provides, for instance, the Law and the Manna from on high for his wayward and wayfaring people. Such a view of things has the profoundest consequences. It means that in the physical wilderness we are constantly reminded of the wilderness within, on the one hand, and the care and compassion of God “while we were yet sinners”, on the other hand.

Such ideas come together wonderfully in these lessons, carrying an unavoidable sacramentality. They recall us to the forms of sanctified life belonging to our life in and with Christ. The Epistle speaks sacramentally about Baptism by reminding us of the ultimate form of our alienation from God such that our life is not just empty from an experiential standpoint; we are also dead on a cosmic level by rejecting God, the Reality on which everything depends. Without the intervention of God, we are dead in our sins. But as the Epistle reminds us we have been “made free from sin.” How? By the free gift of God in Jesus Christ. In baptism we die to ourselves and live for God, but only by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice and its application to us individually in the corporate reality of the Church. Through this union, we are able to participate in Christ’s death and resurrection.

The Gospel relates the familiar story of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness. In a remote and empty place, Jesus teaches, filling hungry souls and minds with the good things of God; but he also sees to their physical needs, the needs of the body. It is all of a piece, the teaching and the feeding. Here Jesus redeems the wilderness within all of us, making it a place of compassion and mercy. Through his Spirit we can overcome the alienation caused by our disobedience. As a result, the illusory paradises of this world are revealed as inadequate. They become, at best, reminders to us of something much greater and eternal—the free gift of God, namely, his life within us.

To live in the mercy of the God who has entered into the wilderness of human sin and wickedness, is to live sacramentally. It means to live through the provision he has made for us, the provision which is nothing less than the gift of himself. He has done this to bring redemption, the redemption of all our sorrows and the pain of our past and present, through the radical sacrifice of his cross. The Holy Eucharist is about our continued participation in his life for us, “having obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching” that sets us free from the emptiness of human striving and frees us to live for God.

Without continued participation in Christ, we end up putting too much faith in our own constructions. We take institutions such as family, marriage, church, and state which could be vehicles of God’s grace, and seek to form them according to our distorted vision. In so doing, we make them caricatures that depart from their proper place in God’s order. We turn them into desolate places. This is what fallen humans do, take what is good in its proper place and elevate it into some supreme good that then leads to undermining other goods. We continually try to construct a world of justice and human

flourishing that ends up falling short, that finally produces another wilderness of alienation and despair. We forget that Jesus said “without me you can do nothing.” Unless we are grafted into the life of Christ and live through his grace, we will forever be falling for a flawed vision that claims to elevate us, while only serving to enslave us. It seems that we often need to experience our own loneliness and emptiness, our wilderness, in order to re-discover our need for communion with God, without which we can have no true communion with one another.

The good news of the Gospel is that we are no longer slaves of sin, that pointless wanderings are not our destiny. This applies to all of us who are baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are not “in” Adam nor are we participating in the Kingdom of Sin and Death. We have died to that kingdom because we have been baptized into Jesus Christ and made citizens of his Kingdom, members of his Body. We are the children of Abraham, we participate in Jesus Christ, who by his faith fulfilled the promise God made to Abraham. And the Father loves us with the same love he has for Jesus. All of the promises the Father made to Jesus apply to everyone who is in Jesus. Just as the Father raised him from the dead, so that very promise belongs to us as well. Sin no longer has dominion over us, as Paul points out a few verses before our Epistle.

We are no longer spiritual orphans, but are branches that have been broken from wild olive trees and grafted into the Olive Tree of the Israel of God, which is Jesus Christ himself. This has nothing to do with making a transaction with God; it has everything to do with God providing a shelter from the storm, a home for his children, a Temple we know as Holy Mother Church. And it means that Christians do not have to sin because we have died to sin and death. By our baptism we have been grafted mystically into life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have been buried with Christ in baptism, we have died to the regime of sin and death, and we have been raised to new life.

We are now also able to bear new fruit, a “fruit unto holiness,” as Paul puts it. What was once barren can now be transformed into a garden. We can push back against the wilderness of desolation and bring new life to our souls because we are connected to the source of Living Water. We no longer must engage in the futility of finding lasting satisfaction in creatures, and instead can share in the life of the Creator. The food of this world only satisfies for a while, and then we hunger again. The food God provides lasts forever.

In the Name...