

Again and Again: God Meets Us
Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15
February 21, 2021

One of the highlights of my high school career was the Ghost Towners Club. It grew out of our Nevada History class as we asked our teacher to take us to see some of the sites about which he told elaborate stories. We visited ghost towns, mining camps, and cemeteries in Northern Nevada. We spent one Halloween evening at the Virginia City cemetery. Through that experience I came to a greater appreciation for the Nevada desert, which has a beauty of its own. Mr. Horlacher may have also recognized the value of getting teens out of their typical haunts and experience the mysterious, transformative power of the desert. It was a critical season of identity formation for us. Stripped of the luxuries and distractions of daily life, we had an opportunity to consider who we were and what life was calling us to be and do.

Today we hear Mark's brief version of Jesus' forty day sojourn in the wilderness. Upon his baptism, God met Jesus as he rose up from the waters, affirming him with the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The same Spirit that descended upon him at his baptism immediately drove him out to the wilderness. The process of identity formation was continuing for Jesus.

Immersion in the waters of baptism is like drowning to an old way of life and rising to a new way of life, cloaked with the presence of God. In the desert Jesus was tempted by Satan and encountered wild beasts. The literal meaning of the word Satan in Hebrew is "to be hostile," or "to oppose." The concept of "Satan" is a force that is hostile to the ways of God or that opposes the fulfillment of God's purpose in our lives. Jesus had to wrestle with what to let go of as he lived in to God's will for his life. God met Jesus even in the wilderness, for angels, messengers of God, waited upon him providing sustenance in the midst of challenge.

After the forty days, Jesus emerged from the wilderness only to be met by the devastating news of the arrest of his cousin, John the Baptizer. John was a fellow prophet who had prepared the way for Jesus' ministry. Even in the face of this loss, God met Jesus, empowering him to claim his identity as the one who came to inaugurate the reign of God. He invited people into their own wilderness experience by calling them to repent. The Greek word for repentance means "to go beyond the mind you have." Jesus invited people to go beyond their own self-

centered existence, to broaden their perspectives to embrace the grace and guidance of God. He called people to yield to an identity shaped by the Spirit of God, as he had.

The season of Lent is a wilderness time for us to wrestle with the identity given us at our baptism, as those who relinquish a worldly way of life and are raised to a life marked by the call to follow Jesus. Lent is a time for us to renew our commitment to live by the mind of Christ and surrender our character to molding by the Holy Spirit. God meets us in our wilderness wanderings, sending angels to minister to us and the Spirit to guide us.

We've been living through a long wilderness sojourn that was thrust upon us. We have reluctantly let go of many aspects of life that we cherished. We've adapted to some new ways, but many of those new ways are not as fulfilling. Even as we look forward to resuming some of our former activities, life will not be the same. Health and safety precautions will need to continue. Worship will be absent live choral singing for a while. We will continue living into different patterns and habits.

A spiritual guide recently shared that spirituality is about letting things fall away. It is not until we shed something that there is room for something new to be born. Transformation more often happens not when something new begins but when something old falls apart. Richard Rohr says, "The pain of something old falling apart – disruption and chaos – invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites and sometimes forces the soul to go to a new place because the old place is not working anymore. The mystics use many words to describe this chaos: fire, darkness, death, emptiness, abandonment, trial, the Evil One. Whatever it is, it does not feel good and it does not feel like God. We will do anything to keep the old thing from falling apart."ⁱ

Yet, again and again, we are reminded that even in the wilderness, God meets us. Even when things fall apart, God meets us at the edge and accompanies us through the loss and brokenness. God meets us in our uncertainty, our suffering, and our reluctance. God promises to stay with us, sending angels to minister to us and accompany us to a new identity or a fresh way of life.

Instead of tightening our control and grasping for certitudes, we need to lean in to trusting God to meet us and guide us forward. The choice, of course, is ours. Change can either help us find new meaning, or it can cause us to close down and turn bitter. The difference is determined by the quality of our inner life. Change will happen. It is a choice to seize it as an opportunity for spiritual

transformation, to receive it as an active process of letting go, living in the confusing dark space for a while, and emerging on the other side in new and unexpected ways.

This congregation is in the midst of change on several levels. In addition to the pandemic, you will experience a change of senior pastors come July. During this wilderness time of Covid-19, the Discernment Team has continued listening for God's vision for the ministry and mission of First UMC, Santa Rosa. Several priorities have been discerned. Those include both intentional connection within the church community, and outreach to neighbors, especially seniors, young families, and people experiencing homelessness and hunger. We affirm the call to make and grow disciples of Christ through spiritual formation as well as advocacy for racial, gender, and social justice. We are called to broaden the means by which we share the story of God's love, including the use of digital media. The closure of our buildings has propelled us to envision ministry in new ways, and to consider the viability of a two-campus church. We'll be sending more information to the congregation in the coming weeks. This is just a "heads-up" to say that change is in the air, some forced upon us, other changes coming in response to God's call. God is creating a fresh identity to replace the former.

In this wilderness wandering, God meets us. God continues to energize people for service, compassion, and growth. The Spirit will guide us into envisioning greater potential as resources are coalesced. Transformation begins when something falls apart, and the soul listens at a deeper level. Spirituality is about letting things fall apart. In the emptiness, the chaos, and the uncertainty, God meets us to give birth to something new.

Through what wilderness are you wandering in your life? Where do you feel at the edge, having left behind former things and standing on the brink of something that has not yet emerged? How has the Spirit of God been present with you? Toward what new identity is God leading you?

Jesus' forty-day sojourn in the wilderness hearkens back to the Israelite people who wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Thomas Merton wrote, "The desert was the region in which the Chosen People had wandered for forty years, cared for by God alone. They could have reached the Promised Land in a few months if they had travelled directly to it. God's plan was that they should learn to love Him in the wilderness and that they should always look back upon the time in the desert as the idyllic time of their life with God alone."ⁱⁱ

God's plan was that they would learn to love God in the wilderness, where they were cared for by God alone. Again and again, whenever we find ourselves

wandering in the wilderness, God meets us, cares for us through transformation, and invites us to grow in love for God. My friends, through whatever change you are living, through whatever wilderness you are traversing, may you know what you are accompanied by our life-giving, loving God.

Compassionate Presence, we marvel that You are mindful of us, we who are sometimes fickle and untrusting. Not only are You with us, You act for us, releasing those chains that bind us to the past, setting us free to sing new songs. We rejoice in your grace and steadfast love.

We pray that this season of Lent will be a springtime of blossoming for our souls. You know that our spirits are barren, somewhat lifeless, uncertain about what lies ahead. We are fallow soil, awaiting seeds of new life. Tune our hearts to your heartbeat that we might grow in love for You and Your creation.

We pray for those who are suffering from freezing temperatures, snow, ice, and tornadoes across our nation. Blanket them in the warmth of your love. Be present with road crews and utility workers working on behalf of others.

We lift to your loving care those who stand at the edge of eviction, foreclosure, unemployment, or the closure of a business. Gently hold them in their fear and dread of what the future holds. Strengthen them with courage.

Shed your peace upon students and teachers struggling with distance learning. Offer wisdom to parents and administrators wrestling with opening schools. Guide communities in search of shelter for those who are without housing.

We pray for our nation as we traverse deep division and conflict. Prompt us toward communal examination of who we are and who we are called to be.

Be present with the United Methodist Church through our wilderness wandering as we seek a path forward for our denomination in its brokenness. Move with this congregation through seasons of change, leading us toward faithfulness to your call at this time.

We give thanks, O God, that You meet us where we are, for we are in need of You. With trust in You, we renew our commitment to follow in the way of Jesus, who taught his disciples to pray....

ⁱ Richard Rohr, "When Things Fall Apart," December 29, 2017, <https://cac.org/when-things-fall-apart-2017-12-29/>.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1958), pp. 4-5.