

**Sermon: Wilderness Mark 1: 9-15 Lent 1 - February 21, 2021**  
**Rideau Park United Church - Rev. Steve Clifton**

When I was 12 years old, I spent a couple of summer weeks at Camp Simpresca, a United Church camp on the shores of Georgian Bay. It was my second summer at the camp and in year 1 we spent our time in our cabin and on the campgrounds and it was fun. But in my second year, camp was amazing. I had an adventurous counsellor and he took us into the wilderness. Instead of sleeping in our cabin we built a shelter in the forest, lashing trees to form a place of shelter. Instead of eating in the dining hall we cooked food over fires we built. And we canoed on Georgian Bay, visiting the islands of the Georgian Bay National Park, singing spirituals as we navigated the wind and waves.

Those summer weeks spent on Georgian Bay were a great introduction to the wonders of the natural world, to the joy that can be discovered in wild places.

What is your experience of wilderness?

In Ottawa we are never far from fields and forests, lakes and rivers, and wild places may be for us places of recreation and retreat.

In our household we have spent much time in this covid time walking, hiking, and exploring natural places. Our dog has never been in better shape. It has been in the wild places that we have sought peace and connection...

The natural world can be a source of peace solace maybe especially in times like ours...

Mary Oliver *Wild Geese*

*Tell me about your despair, and I will tell you mine.  
 Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 are moving across the landscapes,  
 over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 the mountains and the rivers.  
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
 are heading home again.  
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
 the world offers itself to your imagination,  
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
 over and over announcing your place  
 in the family of things.*

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 In the Gospel Emma read for us we hear

“<sup>2</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him- Jesus- out into the wilderness. “

With these words Lent begins. Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we see Jesus, after being baptized, beginning his ministry with a time spent in wild places.

The wilderness can be many things...

In the European literary tradition, the wilderness is a place of myth and magic. Go deep into the forest and you will find faeries and elves and sprites. In the wild woods you may encounter talking animals and scenes that inspire the folk tales of the brothers Grimm.

In Canadian literature the wilderness is a dark and dangerous place. Walk a few paces off the road and you could soon be lost, maybe never seen again. Cold and exposure, bugs, bears and bogs await you.

In the history of African Americans, the wilderness was once a road to freedom. To escape from bondage in the American south one could go North along the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys to Canada; South through forest and swampland to Florida to refuge with the Seminole nation; West along the Gulf waters into Mexico; and East through dense forest into Maritime Canada. The wild places were a route to freedom.

The spirituals of African Americans echo with the themes of the Biblical Exodus- where Gods people wandered in wilderness, journeying towards the Promised Land.

Sometimes in this history the wilderness itself was a place of freedom. Escaped slaves built whole villages in the swamp lands of North Carolina and Virginia, where island homes were hidden from discovery by deep bogs; whole communities sheltered for decades undiscovered until the Emancipation.

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In the Biblical narrative, wilderness is a place of Holy encounter.

- Moses wanders in the wilderness of Sinai and meets God through a bush that doesn't burn.
- Elijah the prophet flees into the wilderness and encounters the Holy One in a still small voice.
- Hagar is banished to the wilderness and there she receives good news from a messenger of God.
- Jacob escapes his brother's wrath in wilderness places and there wrestles with the Lord.
- And the people of God wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years, enduring hardship and trial, before they were ready to be God's people in a new land.
- Jesus begins his ministry with a 40 day wilderness sojourn

In the Scriptural tradition the wilderness is a place where you may meet God. No distractions, no luxuries, none of the usual routines...the wilderness brings one face to face with a deeper reality. In the Biblical story, in the wilderness you meet God

And as a further clue that the wilderness is a holy place, note that Jesus time in the Judean desert is 40 days long. Moses spends 40 days on Sinai. Elijah stays on Mt. Horeb for 40 days. Israel wanders 40 years in the wilderness. 40 days, 40 years... its Biblical shorthand for a sacred time, a significant time. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." And there he dwells for 40 days.

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Lent, that holy season that we entered this week is a wilderness journey, 40 days set apart to maybe encounter the Holy. But in this year doesn't it feel like we have been in the wilderness since maybe last Lent?

Last March we closed schools and offices and sanctuaries and journeyed into a very strange time. 40 days? It's now more than 40 weeks of wilderness wandering for all of us.

Living in the wilderness of pandemic may be hard. It's isolating. We are cut off from community, from family, from activities that bring joy, from well-loved traditions and routines. It makes the future uncertain. We are grieving what has been lost. We are pushing on without some of the usual means of support and encouragement. We may be anxious. We may feel threatened or imperiled.

Living in this strange time may also be freeing. Some traditions may have been binding and they no longer hold us. If we work from home do we miss our commute? If we found social circles at school or the culture of workplaces difficult maybe we are glad to be away from them for a time. Maybe we have had more time with family, not less. Or discovered a new rhythm to our day that is good.

Maybe in this strange pandemic wilderness time we have encountered God?

Meeting God doesn't have to be a big, spectacular thing. Maybe we have found joy in an unexpected place. Found peace in something new. Developed gratitude for something familiar now appreciated more deeply. Found support in a new source. Developed a new practice that has given courage. Found hope in the wilderness...

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Maybe we long for our prolonged wilderness time to be over. Maybe we long for vaccines and normalcy. But while we are here, where we are in this pandemic wilderness time, might we encounter the Holy, or might we be open to God finding us? Jesus heads off into the wilderness of Lent. Maybe we can meet him there.

Let me share with you some images, photos I took over winter walks in our area in the last few months. It's set to the music of a Spiritual which promises healing is to be found in Jesus and in wilderness places like the one we are all in...

