

At Home in the Wilderness

Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13; Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Hyattsville Mennonite Church, Lent 1 and 2

Patricia D. Barth, March 4, 2007

Summary: God's presence makes us feel at home in the wilderness. Wherever we are, God is. God will deliver us; but perhaps not the way we expect. Instead of relying on ourselves or our gadgets, we can call upon God and seek direction in prayer and scripture and other spiritual practices.

We wander in the wilderness.

Our readings from Luke and Deuteronomy have a common thread of wandering in the wilderness. When I think of wilderness, the first thing that comes to my mind is getting lost. I've always hated to get lost. It makes me feel, well, LOST! When I was college-age I could drive around for hours trying to get my bearings. In fact, just after getting our driver's licenses, my girlfriend and I drove around and around the beltway for much of the day. You see, since the beltway is a big circle, you have to know where you are on the circle before you know which way you want to go.

In our defense, I'll say that the beltway was fairly new and the signs weren't great.

Now we have Mapquest and Google maps—I love putting two addresses into the computer and bingo! You get maps and driving directions. But then I discovered, you can't rely on it too much. Mapquest can be just wrong!!! Many's the time I knocked on the wrong door due to Mapquest.

Then someone invented the GPS, or Global Positioning System—amazing technology that uses a satellite to actually pinpoint where you are at the moment, and how to get where you want to go.

But these gadgets are not always correct, either. In England they call GPS systems sat-navs. There's a small village near the river Avon, and last year people had to do some interesting rescues, as many as two a day! The bridge over the Avon was temporarily closed, and there were warning signs on both sides of the river. Yet car after car ended up in the drink. Drivers said, "My sat-nav told me this was the way!"^[1] They ignored the evidence of their eyes and trusted in their gadget instead.

Even if you don't get lost easily like me, you can experience the wilderness. We may feel we're lost in the wilderness when we're sick; or caught up in tragedy or other losses; or buffeted by stress and depression. During wilderness times we may feel angry, lifeless, abandoned, scared or confused; some distressing combination of all of those

^[1] De Bruxelles, Simon, "Sat-nav dunks dozy drivers in deep water." *The Times Website*, April 20, 2006; cited in *Homiletics*, 19:1, February 2007.

things; or something entirely different. And we want to get OUT of the wilderness and get our lives back. But we don't know how to fix it.

Our tools are inadequate and sometimes even dangerous.

Like me with my MapQuest, or English drivers with their sat-navs, we often try to get ourselves out of the wilderness with inadequate, even dangerous tools.

We usually rely on ourselves alone to pull us out of trouble. But then we wonder why we are still stuck in the mud and spinning our wheels. Education, money, good jobs, American can-do spirit and independence—these are all good things, but they only go so far. They don't keep us from getting lost, or help us survive a terrible loss or a serious illness. And some of us wield dangerous tools, addictions to food, alcohol or drugs, which only drive us deeper into the wilderness, getting us more and more stuck.

Instead of yourselves, or human tools and gadgets, rely on God.

But our God is a saving God. God saves us when we can't save ourselves. Listen to the words of Psalm 91^{2[2]}, verses 1-6:

The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, abides under the shadow of the Almighty.

You shall say to the Holy One,

“You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust.”

God will deliver you from the snare of the hunter, and from the deadly pestilence.

She will cover you with her pinions, and you shall find refuge under her wings;

His faithfulness shall be a shield and buckler.

You shall not be afraid of any terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day;

Of the plague that stalks in the darkness, nor of the sickness that lays waste at mid-day.

Our God is faithful; a refuge and a fortress in any danger. God wants to deliver us, will deliver us, from whatever wilderness we find ourselves in. As Paul wrote, “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.”^{3[3]}

We follow a Lord who wants nothing but the best for us and for all people. When he looked on Jerusalem, Jesus remarked that he had always wanted to gather the people under his wings like a hen does her chicks. (Luke 13:31-35)

The key here is “you shall not be afraid.” If you trust in God, and abide under God's shadow, fear can't strangle you. A scripture I repeat to myself whenever I'm scared is, “Whether I live or whether I die, I am the Lord's.”^{4[4]} We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, and he is always, always with us! God walks with us no matter which wilderness

^{2[2]} (NRSV, adapted for inclusive language)

^{3[3]} 2 Corinthians 1:9-11.

^{4[4]} Romans 14:8

we are wandering in, whether it's a place of our own making or something that has been forced upon us or some combination of the two.

Listen to verses 11-13: ***“For God shall give the angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You shall tread upon the lion and the adder; you shall trample the young lion and the serpent under your feet.”***

Hmm. It sounds like God won't let anything bad happen to us at all! Note that this is the scripture that the devil quoted to Jesus when he was tempting him in the wilderness. At first blush that sounds like that's the way it should be! A former missionary to China tells this story. During World War II, when Japan was bombing China, a Chinese woman was very frightened. The missionary told her that she is a child of God, and God's angels will protect her. So the woman went outside during the bombing, carrying a paper parasol, and shouting, “I am a Child of God! Nothing can hurt me!” And she **was** indeed found safe and uninjured when the bombing ended!

But surely the Bluffton baseball team members who recently died in an accident were children of God, weren't they? Of course they were. Being a child of God is no guarantee that bad things won't happen, no matter how much we or the psalmist might wish it. Even Jesus had to wander in the wilderness for forty days, hungry and alone. And then, at the end of his ministry, he went to the cross, willingly taking on our human burden of suffering and death.

No, being a child of God is no guarantee that the angels will swoop down and carry us so that we don't even bruise a heel. God can bring good out of any painful circumstance; but usually not right away. Those who mourn the people killed in Atlanta this week; the families and friends of soldiers and ordinary people that continue to die every day in Iraq and Afghanistan; there's no doubt they are walking in the wilderness right now. There's no escaping the grief process—you must go through it, painful as it is; but our God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. God never abandons us. And in the end, God leads us home.

Guideposts we can trust

The God we worship is at home in the wilderness, and so can we be. Seek God's presence, and call upon him if you feel alone. There are guideposts; not human gadgets or self-reliance but spiritual tools, practices we can trust to bring us closer to God and to help us find a way out of the wilderness. These are stillness; listening; fasting; almsgiving; devotional reading; prayer and Scripture; and especially our loving relationships with other people, and with God. It's an amazing thought, but true; that the great God who created the heavens and stretched them out, wants a relationship with you through Jesus Christ. God has a direction for you and a path for you to follow.

Our God is a God of salvation, who saves us when we can't save ourselves.

As Psalm 91 ends,

“Because she is bound to me in love, therefore will I deliver her; I will protect her, because she knows my name.

He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I am with him in trouble; I will rescue him and bring him to honor.

With long life will I satisfy my children, and show them my salvation.” Amen.