

YEARNINGS

Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life

Trust the Process

(Yearning for Meaning)

A prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
February 28-March 1, 2009 • First Sunday in Lent
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 25: 1-10

To you, O God, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O God; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O God, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O God!

Good and upright is God; therefore God instructs sinners in the way. God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble God's way. All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees.

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

"And the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness.

***He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;
and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."***

Mark 1:12-13

Does anybody you know like Lent? We could probably pick a quarrel with Jesus for landing in that Lenten wilderness; and we could quarrel with the Church for instituting the season of Lent. Surely Jesus could have avoided those 40 days of unrelenting trouble in the wilderness. Who likes pain, hardship, suffering and temptation? Can't we find some way to escape all this unpleasantness...all that messiness. Who cares about Lent anyway?

We could try to avoid it. But sometimes what we try most to avoid is what we most need. Despite my own resistance, I've concluded that this season of Lent is crucial to our spiritual health and well-being. It is Lent that teaches us to embrace the sacred messiness of life. It is Lent that teaches us to lament, to face the grief and pain in our life. It is Lent that teaches us to discover resources that we didn't know we had. Yes, we might rather avoid Lent; but pain and trouble are a part of our lives. What then can we learn from the life of Jesus to

help us when we are driven into the wilderness? What then can we learn from Jesus when we yearn for meaning in our messiness?

"Driven" is the right word. Jesus wasn't merely invited or encouraged to head to the wilderness. He was DRIVEN there, which is perhaps another way of saying that he went there kicking and screaming. There was no way around the wilderness. He was forced to go through it...to deal with it...just like we are. Mark's description is terse: Jesus is baptized in the Jordan. He comes out of the water and the Spirit descends upon him, like a dove: "You are my beloved." Then, immediately, the Spirit shifts from being gentle like a dove to a more aggressive bird, like a diving hawk, forcing, driving Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days.

The verb "drove" is vivid and wild. It suggests that Jesus may have been trying to linger a little too long around the scene of his baptism at the Jordan. It would only be natural for him to want to relish *that* moment—the feeling of love, of security, of embrace, of promise and blessing that surrounded him there. Who doesn't like basking in *those* feelings—who doesn't like lingering in *that* place? But then the Spirit drives him into the wilderness. And this all happens before – before – Jesus starts his anointed mission in the Galilee "*proclaiming the good news of God.*" Jesus is driven into the messiness, the confrontation, the suffering of life – the wilderness—and from there he boldly proclaims the *good news* of God. How in the world did he get from wilderness messiness to good news proclamation? What does this mean?

The wilderness seems like a kind of test, an initiation, a process of maturation and strengthening; of disorientation and reorientation. Jesus is clearly anointed, baptized, loved—and then WHAM, he is driven into the wasteland for a mighty struggle. Mark says it was "Satan" who tempted him *there*. Mark also says there was the presence of "wild beasts" *there*. All of this suggests to me that it was a difficult and fearful and gut wrenching time. The way Mark tells it, it is as if God is saying, "Okay Jesus, let's find out if you have what it takes."

Do you have the stuff to withstand life's hellish situations? Do you have the where-with-all to face hardship? When life is spinning out of control, can you trust God's promise to provide for you *there*? When life is a mess, can you find the confidence that "all the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness?" Or will you be seduced by many temptations? Will you be waylaid by other paths that promise life but only lead to death? Will you let your fear trump your trust in what is good and right and just?" What meaning do you find in the wilderness experiences of life?

All of us know wilderness. If you don't, you will! All of us fall upon hard times. All of us know about the messiness of life. You go for a medical appointment, and the report is in: cancer! The early morning phone call comes: a loved one has died. Your partner/spouse drops the bomb: "I've met someone else." Your children make poor decisions and act in ways that rip out your heart. You go through a season of depression or the feeling that you have lost your way. Pain and struggle happen to all of us. THIS IS THE WORLD OF LENT! And it's probably the most crucial time of the church year.

And yes, we might rather avoid it, skip it, escape it, but dodging Lent would be settling for a Pollyanna, summertime faith –a "summer spirituality," as Martin Marty called it: all sunshine and no clouds; all rejoicing and no lament. But life is not that way, and Lent will not allow us to live with rose colored glasses. Lent calls us to develop what Marty calls a "wintry spirituality." When we are faced with our wilderness testing, we have an opportunity to learn the meaning of life and love, of what really matters, of where our strength and hope rest. We can learn from the wilderness, if we embrace it, and not try to deny it or avoid it.

And it is true: we seem to be driven into the wilderness at those transition points of our life—the wilderness comes *immediately* after graduation, after marriage, when the kids leave home, when the marriage breaks up, when you retire, when you get sick, when you lose your job.

I've read stories about people who take off on long hikes on the Appalachian Trail. It seems that those who head out for a lengthy hike on the Trail (as in three or four months) have a somewhat different purpose than those who walk for only an hour or two, or a day or two. Most people who head out on long hikes on the Trail are doing it at one of these transition points in their lives: after college, between jobs, at retirement, at the end of a marriage. "I came out here to get my head clear," some will say. "I came out here to get back in touch with what's really important." It's wilderness time.

A young man in his mid-twenties came to the realization that he had been frittering away his life, being way too self-centered. In the middle of his restlessness, he accepted an invitation to join a group of people going to the Virginia mountains to make a "vision quest." It was a program that offered training in survival tactics and various spiritual exercises. Then, the participants are sent out individually to spend four days by themselves in the mountainous wilderness.

After this young man had concluded his wilderness experience, he met with a group of friends to reflect on what happened to him. First, he said that out there in the wild, there was extraordinary quiet and a lack of the usual distractions: no TV, radio, computers, video games, phones, i-Pods, Blackberry's, and all the devices that have become so much a part of our daily lives. It was, he said, so quiet. He began to hear sounds he might usually have missed: the breeze, songs of distant birds, the crunch of his own footsteps, insects buzzing, his own breathing.

He also began to hear his own inner voice. Questions were being put to him about his life. One day as he walked he came across a dead animal in a field, and a little later he saw a fragile newborn doe. As he reflected on these events, they became statements to him, one suggesting that he needed to give up dead-end paths, and the other reminding him of how fragile and hopeful life is, especially the lives of the young.

During those four days he decided to turn his life around and dedicate himself to ministry with youth. He decided to quit his current job, accepting a lower paying position to be a youth minister in his church. In that reflection session the group asked him if he had found being alone in the wilderness dangerous. "No," he said, "All the while I felt as if the wilderness was sustaining me."

(from Jude Siciliano, "First Impressions," The Order of Preachers, The Dominicans, Southern Dominican Province, USA)

Maybe that's what Mark means when it says that angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness. Maybe the wilderness sustained Jesus, too. And maybe this young man's experience might also encourage us to take some time apart this Lent to listen to our own inner voices. We may not be able to go off to the mountains (that would be nice though, wouldn't it!), but we could decide to set some extra time aside to pray and listen – to slow down and reflect. We might begin by eliminating at least an hour a day from our TV viewing and using that time for a "vision quest" in our own homes by reading and studying (Rabbi Kula says that when we pray, we talk to God but when we study, God talks to us!). We might try engaging in some sacred conversation with family and friends or sitting before a lighted candle in silence. Each of us can find a particular, intentional way to allow the Spirit to drive us toward clarity and cleansing and a centering of our lives.

And it is this clarity and cleansing and centering that I feel we need NOW more than ever. Do you sense the risk of disorder and chaos rumbling beneath the surface of our lives and of our country? Do you feel the impact of the drone of negative news about our economy: the threat of job loss...both real and imagined...the declining stock market? Do you sense the danger that "wild beasts" are lurking all around? Do you feel with me the fear – the anxiety that is so rampant and so raw? What could all of this possibly mean for you? For me? For us? Rabbi Kula, in his book *YEARNINGS: EMBRACING THE SACRED MESSINESS OF LIFE* says:

There is no simple answer. There's only the search itself: the meaning-making and unmaking; the mistakes and healing; the dirty dishes washed only to be used again; life intensity unfolding everywhere. Once we know this, there is nothing to fear. We are free to dive into the messes, to get nice and dirty, and to experience the transformative power of sorting it all through.

(Rabbi Irwin Kula, *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*, page 54)

Jesus seems to have known and trusted in the power of the kind of process that Rabbi Kula is naming. In our short little passage from Mark's Gospel we find both baptism *and* wilderness. We have Jesus' baptism, a high point of blessing and goodness and joy: "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased." But in the very next sentence we also have the hellish wilderness, where temptations lurk and wild beasts roar. And in the midst of all of this, there is this ominous notation, a little tacked on phrase that is easy to miss if you are not paying attention, that Jesus' friend John (the Baptizer) was *arrested*. This is just one more somber detail that life is indeed messy...and that turning toward God is risky. It's all right here in this short little text: the good and the bad, the joy and the pain, the wonder and goop and dualities of life!

But out of all of this, Jesus forges a new path. Meaning is made. There seems to be nothing to fear after all! With new confidence, Jesus returns to the Galilee *“proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* Trust the Good News that God and God's Kingdom is here, is right now.

When life is messy, and I find myself in wilderness times, I keep hearing an inner voice that says, “Trust the process. Trust the process!” Trust the creative, transforming power of God at work in the process of life. Trust that embracing the messiness of life is laced with meaning and deepened understanding. Rabbi Kula asks

What would happen if I slowed down and relaxed into my own messes, rather than always rushing to clean them up? What if I stopped trying to solve every problem the minute it came my way, to make what seems wrong right? And how much more rich and meaningful would life be if we learned to gently sort through our tangled lives? Perhaps our messes are the treasure boxes of our souls...It is a rare and wonderful experience when the vicissitudes of daily life actually expand our awareness, bringing to life something we may have believed but not yet fully embodied. When we enter into the grit of life, the stuff we may resist or want to make go away, it's amazing the gold we discover.

(Rabbi Irwin Kula, *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*, page 44)

Our Lenten struggle may come in various forms. We may be coping with an individual demon. We may be reaching for long-needed reconciliation with a friend or a family member or even God. We may be groping with a vocational decision, a call that keeps tugging at us. We may be seeking a way forward in our paralyzing fear. In all these struggles, we are called to trust the process, to trust the Lenten process...a process where both baptism and wilderness lead to good news; where both life and death lead to life again; where joy and sorrow, simplicity and complexity, order and chaos lead to new meaning and we find ourselves starting to yearn all over again.

It is out of all this messiness of life that we find blessing. We find meaning again and again and again...a meaning that often comes in unexpected and surprising ways. Never forget – God has a habit of sending angels in the midst of Lent.

Amen.