



Genesis 37:3–4,12–28: Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" -- that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

It all begins in the wilderness. God seems to have a special affinity for the wilderness. Things happen in the wilds of the wilderness.

Have you noticed that whenever God wants to do something new, whenever God wants to form a people, inspire a nation, prepare a prophet or transform a people that it all starts in the wilderness? In the wilderness, we are left bare, vulnerable, open. In the wilderness, it stops being about us and starts being about the future that God is promising. We go into the wilderness to adjust our sight; to clear our vision, to find our focus. It is there that we seek glimpses of God, and we can hear more clearly the footfalls of the Divine. Things happen in the wilderness.

Before there was Bruno, we didn't talk about Joseph, at least his dysfunctional brothers didn't after they sold him to Egypt. Talk about wholesome biblical family values. If we don't pay close attention we miss that Joseph and his brothers are out in the wilderness. "throw him into this pit here in the wilderness"

Fast forward a few millennia...

Jesus, a lot like Joseph comes down to his cousin John to fulfill all righteousness to be baptized in the River Jordan. And soaking wet with the voice of God still ringing in his ears he is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to discern and discover who he is and much more importantly whose he is and what he is sent for. It all begins in the wilderness.

We all have our own wilderness experience that has shaped us, molded our outlook on life, and formed the ministries that we share. Mine was on a crystal clear blue-skied Tuesday morning standing outside St. Paul's chapel in lower Manhattan looking up to see a plane slam into the World Trade Center. Enter the wilderness.

I am convinced that the most transformative and most pervasive and most persistent character in the Bible is the wilderness. Not just the places of sand, rocks, and stones, but the people and places that define and refine who we are. Pick any biblical figure and they all went to the wilderness.

Two years ago, in the season of Lent no less, we entered the wilderness of pandemics. Like Joseph, we felt like we were thrown into a pit and sold off to Egypt. Like the psalmist, we cried out, "how long O Lord, how long?" I don't think that it is a coincidence that this pandemic began in the season of Lent.

If we are honest with ourselves we know that as a church we needed this wilderness time. We knew that we needed to rediscover, reimagine, and refine who we are and who we follow in this itinerant preacher named Jesus from two miles north of nowhere aka Nazareth. We needed to be stripped bare of all the detritus and distractions so that we could die to colonialism, and sexism, and racism, and homophobia, and classism, and tribalism and all the forces that divide, diminish, and denigrate. Our church needs to die. It needed to die a long time ago. Because God is not in the business of resurrecting the living. The problem is that we want resurrection without death.

Growing up my grandmother used to sing. She sang when she was happy. She sang when she was sad. She even sang when she was mad. She would sing, "there is a balm in Gilead" because she would say, "I may not know what the future holds but I know who holds the future."

The wilderness, like Sabbath, calls us to discover anew who we truly are, to look beyond the superficial and the selfish and there find the call to follow Christ through the wilderness, into our neighborhoods and communities, to Jerusalem, the garden of betrayal, to the cross and discover anew with Mary Magdalene the joy of the empty tomb. We have seen the lord. But resurrection without crucifixion is just fiction. It all starts in the wilderness.

My prayer, my hope, my dream for us as a church, as the body of Christ, as faithful followers of Jesus, is that we would have the courage to let this church die. Die to the things that have held us back, kept us down so that we can be set free and stand firm to become what God dreams for us to be. That we don't fall to the temptation, like the children of Israel, too long for the fleshpots

and leaks that we knew, but that we might reflect on the places our God where we met thee and offer the hard, holy, and healing transformation that our Church and our world so desperately needs.

It is time for this Church to stop talking about the gospel, and be about the gospel. In the words of the poet William Pierson Merrill,

*Rise up O saints of God
From vain ambition turn
Christ rose triumphant that your heart
With nobler zeal might burn.*

*Speak out, O saints of God!
Despair engulfs earth's frame;
as heirs of God's baptismal grace,
the word of hope proclaim.*

May we have the courage and the grace with Joseph (we don't talk about Joseph, enough) and Jesus and all our spiritual ancestors to be transformed and renewed by a God who meets in the wild, calls into to us in sabbath rest, and then sends us by grace. It all begins in the wildness. Come away with Jesus and rest for a while. Easter is coming. Amen.