

A sermon by Zhihui Poh at Princeton United Methodist Church on Sunday, March 9: Lenten Landscapes: Wilderness

The word “wilderness” in Scripture denotes a range of unsettled and uncultivated landscapes, from plains and mountains offering seasonal pasturage, to nearly barren desert, to scorched, toxic land incapable of supporting vegetation. It typically refers to the lonely, abandoned or desolate habitation of wild animals and demons but not of humans. “Wilderness” also often symbolizes unstructured time and space. It is not difficult to see how times of fear, distress, dread, catastrophe, uncertainty, loneliness and feelings of meaninglessness can be described as “being in the wilderness”. Yet occasionally, the wilderness represents a place that signals new beginnings. The good news that God’s Word declares is that God does not intend for life’s wilderness as humanity’s eternal destiny.

This morning, God’s Word shows us that even life’s barren and hostile wilderness cannot separate us from God’s love and the destiny God has for us. Let us consider together life’s wilderness in light of God’s grace; God’s discipline, and God’s confidence.

First, wilderness as God’s grace.

By God’s grace, I mean God’s providential care. God arranges things in our lives in a way that will turn out to be the greatest good for us.

In our reading from Exodus 13, God had rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and now had to decide the route to bring them to the promised land. A shorter route which meant war, or a longer route through the wilderness? In verse 17, we read that God did not lead the Israelites by the shorter way because “God thought, ‘If the people face war (with the Philistines), they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’” Can you see God’s concern for his people? God’s concern was not only that they got out of slavery in Egypt – it was to ensure that they didn’t return to it! Exodus 13:5 describes God’s destination for the Israelites: a land flowing with milk and honey.” God intends for his people a land where human life flourishes.

The wilderness is not our destiny. God’s destiny for us is the best life that we can have. But our earthly journey there sometimes brings us into hardships, pain and suffering. And often, the wilderness seems meaningless, especially while we are in it. The Israelites didn’t seem to know the reason for the wilderness detour. Although God’s plan was for them to avoid war, verse 18 tells us that they left

Egypt prepared for battle. Likewise, the reason for what we are going through in life is sometimes incomprehensible to us. The good news is that even in the seemingly meaningless wilderness, God intends good for you. And God is with you. In verse 21 and 22, we see that God led his people through the wilderness in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and did not leave his place with the people. If God is with you, it means God is for you, and if God is for you, who or what can be against you?¹ And through the wilderness, God is taking you to a land flowing with milk and honey.

Second, wilderness as God’s discipline.

Psalm 106:6-33 highlight key events in Israel’s wilderness wandering which spanned 40 years. But something is not mentioned in this psalm. Israel’s wandering in the wilderness could have been much shorter. You see, after a few years in the wilderness, the Israelites had reached the border of the promised land. But, as verse 24 puts it, “they despised the pleasant land” and they had no faith in God’s promise. Moses had sent spies into the promised land. They returned with glowing reports of the land. But they also reported about the powerful occupants of the land and the impossibility of entering it. So the Israelites lost faith in God. They refused to enter the promised land. They grumbled, “It would have been better for us to have died in Egypt or in the wilderness. Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? ... It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!”²

When we hear that God has destined us for the best life we can have, how many of us said to ourselves, “Yes! I want my life to flourish. I want to get to that promised land. I want to receive God’s destiny for me!” And then when we come so close to deciding to receive that destiny, we hear a voice asking, “Are you sure? Do you know what receiving this destiny means? It means that you will be called a CHRISTIAN. What would your family, friends and colleagues think? Sure, you will receive love, joy, peace and hope. Your life will no longer be meaningless. But the fun stuff in life – sex, drugs, alcohol, money, status, praises of people and power. Are you sure you want to give these up? Nah....this so-called destiny is impossible to reach. It’s much better for you to return to the wilderness and die there.”

¹ Rom 8:31.

² Adapted Summary of Num 13-14. Quotation from Num 14:2-4.

Have you made the decision to receive God's destiny for your life? Do you want the treasures of heaven that truly satisfies the deepest human desires? Or do you prefer the riches and pleasures of the world which leave your souls empty? Decide to prefer the world too often and you may get stuck in the wilderness. That is what happened to the Israelites. Since they preferred to die in the wilderness, God gave them their hearts' desire – 40 years in the wilderness. Before you think of God as a tyrant, read Psalm 106 again. The Israelites' rebellion and grumbling against God was not a one-off event. Time and again God showed mercy to a rebellious people. In meting out the judgment of wilderness, God gave the people what they kept asking for. Scripture tells us that God does not delight in the death of anyone.³ But there is a point in time that God will no longer contend with our unbelief and disobedience. When will that be? I don't know. But you are still alive. And you are here today. I tell you that even now God is showing you mercy. Now is a good time to decide to step out of the wilderness. Now is a good time to receive God's promised land of goodness.

Aside from judgment, God's discipline can be understood at another level. As the older Israelites got their request for wilderness, their children got implicated. God said that their children will possess the promised land, but they had to go through the wilderness with their parents. In the extended wilderness wandering, the children will see the stubborn disobedience of their parents and its consequences; they will continue to see how God sustains them with food and drink in the wilderness; they will grow up as a generation who knows what it means to trust a good God who is both compassionate and holy; and they will be the generation that enters the promised land. It is in the wilderness that God disciplined a people and raised them up as his children.

Remember, the wilderness is not God's destiny for you. You may feel like life's a wilderness because of sin – whether your own or of others, but your being here today is a sign that God is still calling you to be his child. If the wilderness is God's discipline, it is only because God loves you and wants the best for you. Learn well from your wilderness experience but don't stay there. That is not your destiny. Return to God and trust God to bring you out of the wilderness into the promised land.

³ Eze 18:32.

Third, wilderness as God's confidence.

God's confidence in you as a genuine child of God.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4 comes immediately after his baptism. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of God came upon him. And then there was the divine affirmation, "This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased." And then, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness..." What? Jesus was just affirmed as God's Son and now he is led into the wilderness to be tempted?

A clue lies in what happened in the wilderness. Jesus had fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. Just like any human being, Jesus became famished. In that vulnerability, the devil came to tempt him. Twice, the devil included in his temptations a challenge to Jesus' identity, "show me that you are the Son of God by turning stone into bread and throwing yourself down." Food and physical protection are good things to have. But Jesus knew that it was not the power to get these things that set him apart as God's Son. Jesus would later perform many such miracles. But the true mark of a child of God is that person's love and obedience to God. And so Jesus proved himself to be the Son of God by choosing to obey God rather than the devil. This obedience would be seen to the end, when Jesus refused to submit to the devil to gain the whole world. Jesus did come to save the whole world, but he came to do it in a way that is obedient to God and not the devil. In the wilderness, God showed the devil what kind of Son Jesus is – Jesus is truly God's Son because even in the midst of the wilderness, hunger, rejection and the promise of the crucifixion, he will stare the devil in the face and say, "Get away from me, Satan. I choose God." If Jesus were your child, would you not be proud?

From time to time, we may be sent into the wilderness for no sin of our own or for any other apparent reason. Not all human suffering is due to anyone's sin. And sometimes knowing that makes the wilderness even harder to bear. In such times, remain confident in your identity as God's child and the promise that God is with you despite what circumstances tell you. Continue to love and obey God. For in such times God is boasting to Satan and all those around you, "This is my child, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased. Nothing can make this child turn against me." And remember, the wilderness is not your eternal destiny. Jesus' love and obedience to God led him to a painful death on the cross for all our sins. But Jesus' life did not end in death. On the third day, he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of God. And he will come again in glory.

And when Jesus comes, he will also raise you up and welcome you into the kingdom of heaven.

As we consider the incomparable goodness of our promised land with God for eternity, where there will be no more death, pain and injustice, but righteousness, love and peace, the wilderness becomes a metaphor for our entire earthly journey towards that fulfilment. Sorrow, hardship and danger tempt faithless and rebellious hearts; pleasure, prosperity and security tempt dulled and complacent hearts. All of life is a wilderness that needs to be lived with a steadfast trust in God's love and God's promised destiny for us – a destiny far greater than whatever the world has to offer.

The season of Lent helps us to be sober about our earthly life. Lent is a season that looks forward to Easter, and yet remembers that before the resurrection there is death; and the journey towards the cross was not one free of temptations to abort the plan.

When Jesus says that whoever wants to follow him must deny themselves and take up their crosses daily, he means that we need to decide every day that we are living for a greater destiny than the wilderness of this world; he means that we need to daily step out of the wilderness of the world and step into the land where God's righteousness and justice are demonstrated in our lives; he means that in the wilderness of this world, we need to daily say "No" to the devil and "Yes" to God. We are doomed to fail if left on our own. But God is with us always, leading and empowering us by the Holy Spirit.

Whether your wilderness experience is of grace, discipline or confidence, the Lord declares to you today, "Though you now walk in the wilderness, the wilderness is not your destiny. I will bring you to a land flowing with milk and honey if you will trust me with all your heart."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.