

Today I'm going to break one of my own rules of preaching and start a sermon with a joke. So here it is: a boastful preacher, perhaps a Baptist but perhaps a Dominican since the Dominicans are a Catholic order who pride themselves in their preaching, anyway, a boastful preacher told his friends that give him any subject, any subject and he could come up with a biblical text and preach a full sermon, with no preparation. So of course, they took him up on it. As he stepped into the pulpit, he was given a piece of paper on which was written one word, Constipation. So he faced the congregation, put his hands on the pulpit and began, "Moses took the tablets and went into the wilderness..."

That's funny for two reasons; firstly because it's a bit of bathroom humor from the pulpit and secondly because of the pun on tablets. We all know that he wasn't taking Imodium or Pepto-Bismol but the stone tablets on which we written the law.

Because it was during that very long time in the wilderness, the time that the Bible loosely describes as forty years, that the group of people who came out of Egypt and their descendants and hangers-on became a recognizable nation with laws and ethic and a self-identity. At the time of this morning's reading, they were a long way from that point. They were meeting the difficulties of wilderness living with a lot of complaining, but God heard their complaint and provided them with food.

Early in the life of Jesus, he too spent a long time- 40 days - in the wilderness. And there too he became hungry. But his response was very different. Even as he was tempted to use his supernatural powers to meet the desires of his human ego and physical body, he remained disciplined and refused to give in, asserting again and again that God's power is greater and God's power is in the path of humility. This is the same approach that he took to his final great test – his crucifixion.

We don't often see Jesus on his own – once he starts his ministry he is typically surrounded by people, but occasionally he goes away to a desert place or up a mountain – to a place of wilderness – in order to pray and to regroup. In today's Gospel, he tried to take his disciples on retreat into the wilderness but

they were followed and soon they were surrounded by thousands of hungry people. And through some miracle, as Jesus broke the bread, it became enough for everyone. Just like the manna from heaven.

Wilderness is associated both with hunger and with God's provision. It can be a place of creativity and spiritual formation.

But when you're in the middle of the wilderness, hungry, tired and lonely, God seems a long way away. In my own life, I have experienced several bouts of severe depression. Times when I'm constantly tired, it seems very hard to get out of bed and nothing interests me even if I had the energy to do it. Times when God seems very far away.

We live in a time when we think that if we are walking in the Spirit we are going to feel good. We should be living in the zone or in the flow, when spiritual energy moves through us bringing everything into a loving, simple, easy path. Whether it's the O magazine or Real Simple or even Woman's World, every time we walk through the grocery checkout we are assailed with pictures of women who have found the secret and lost weight, organized their closet and finally gotten their lives together.

So when you're wandering in the wilderness, you not only have the sense of being radically lost and alone but also the guilt that if you were living right this wouldn't be happening. This is confirmed by signs which say "If God seems far away, guess who moved?"

But I want to suggest to you that in the spiritual life, wilderness times of dryness are very normal. They are not always the same as depression but often the two seem to come together. For whatever reason it seems as though all the things that gave us joy, all the places that our spirit soared, all the practices which sustained us, no longer do. But that is not an indication that God is any further away than before. God was no further from the Hebrew people in the wilderness than he had been when they had enjoyed fresh vegetables in Egypt. God was no further from Jesus when he was being tempted than during the transfiguration.

We can't actually be far away from God since God is in and through all things. We can harden our hearts to the promptings of the Spirit and turn away from the path of humility. That can make it seem more difficult to connect with the divine.

But dry, wilderness times when we long for God and yet cannot seem to connect, are a normal part of the spiritual journey. In fact they are a good sign. Many of the saints experienced such times and the 16th century Spanish mystic John of the Cross coined the phrase, "the dark night of the soul" to describe these periods when God seems absent. Mother Teresa spent decades in this kind of darkness, even while she was tending to the sick and dying in Calcutta. She wrote, "If there be God --please forgive me--When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven--there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul.--I am told God loves me--and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."¹

I don't know why this is. But it does seem that such periods may, for most of us who are not Mother Teresa, lead to a deeper spiritual growth, to new healing. In the desert there is always the hope of water. The promise of new life. The prophet Isaiah said,

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,

¹ <http://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>

the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

This is our hope. That in the wilderness God promises there will be water. Whether your wilderness is one of depression, physical pain, loneliness, despair, or a spiritual crisis, God promises that there will be water, there will be relief.

There is an evening prayer which we sometimes use at the end of the Saturday eucharist. The last verse says,

The night heralds the dawn
Let us look expectantly to a new day,
New joys, new possibilities.

Jesus used his times in the wilderness as springboards for his ministry. The Hebrews used their time of wandering to become a self-identified people with an identity and an ethos.

I don't know why we have times in the wilderness. But I do know that God uses them to make us more Christ-like, to transform us into the people she created us to be. I do know that there is always hope and that we can look expectantly to a new day.