

*Wilderness is a powerful symbol for the times in our lives
that are challenging, perhaps lonely and chaotic,
but through which we may become more aware
of the divine at work in our lives.*

John comes out of the wilderness.

Out of the wilderness – what an image – have you thought about it?

What might it mean to come out of the wilderness?

Wilderness is a powerful symbol in scripture.

The desert wilderness was the place –
where the Israelites believed they had met God.¹

It was a place of testing – a place of preparation for what comes next.

In the New Testament wilderness was a place of testing for Jesus.

It was not a place you chose to go. It was not the romantic illusions of wilderness
that emerged in the 19th century here in the United States –
the wilderness stories of Henry David Thoreau or even John Muir – or even Teddy Roosevelt.

It was nothing of the wilderness that we are drawn to for “wilderness experiences”
that are really more for recreation than anything else.

It was certainly not romanticized by biblical writers.

No, John’s wilderness was a wild place – a place that had the power
to bring us face to face with ourselves – while we deal with fears or uncertainties.

It was not a place you would usually choose to go.

One either found themselves in the wilderness or were thrust into it.

The wilderness could be a place of danger and deprivation.

It could be a place of threat, chaos and alienation.

And most of us know some times in our lives like that.

But at the same time - it can be transformative.

Sometimes it is seen as a place of withdrawal from the world to face the reality of God,
oneself and one's neighbor, or to confront and overcome the power of evil. ¹

John came talking about repentance and forgiveness -
and baptism with water.
We hear the words every year but they seem so distant -
so old, so out of touch with the present.
Maybe it is too familiar.

Repentance is often part of the process of letting go
of something we want to hold on to -
not because we need to hold on – but because we don't know how to let go.
Repentance is about releasing control over something we do or something we think
that is harmful to us – maybe others too.
To repent is to turn back - and get ready to let go.
The thing we call repentance is about – something -
that is so hard to do - we think we cannot do it.

"I just cannot forgive that person, or something that happened in the past."
It would not be "to repent" if it were easy to let go of.
If it is a thought or emotion or action that can be let go of -
forgiven – "let bygones be bygones" – it is not even in the category of repentance.

Does this make sense?
So repentance is the turning back to review or re-examine something -
and forgiveness is the letting go.
These two things are not easy.

This is why I think we hear about it in the context of coming out of the wilderness.
John must have grown and learned during his time in the wilderness
in a way that prepared him to introduce us to

¹ Adapted from Keith Innes in *A Christian Investigation*

Out of the Wilderness— based on Mark 1:1-8
Aspen Community UMC and Christ Episcopal Church
December 7, 2008

Page 3 of 6

the one he said was coming – Jesus – who came to John -
to be baptized in the river.

John's time in the wilderness surely prepared him in a special way.



Wm. Paul Young in the Bestseller novel *The Shack* tells the story of Mackenzie Phillips who goes back deep into a wilderness – at the invitation of “Papa.”

Papa was the pet name his wife Nan used for God.

That name did not fit for Mackenzie – such a name implied something more intimate than Mackenzie considered God. It brought too many memories of the abuse by his father.

But in the months that followed the brutal death of his five year old daughter Missy the invitation arrives in his mailbox.

Between questioning whether it was a hoax or a prank – or an attempt by Missy’s killer to lure him back out to the place where Missy had most likely met her death, he decides to go.

He borrowed his friend’s jeep and embarked on the journey.

He set out on foot after the road came to an end – still a mile or so from the shack.

Mackenzie notices the trail is treacherous, the rocks icy and slippery as he descends into the deep forest.

He listens to the crunch of his steps on the snow and the heaviness of his breathing.

As much as he wanted to turn and run back to the Jeep -

his feet seemed to have a will of their own -

determined to continue down the path -

and deeper into the dimly lit and increasingly dense woods.

It’s an allegory you see.

It’s about the pull and tug of our relationship with God – among other things -

especially when we are trying to get through some rough times in our lives.

Eugene Petersen suggested might be to our generation

what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* was for another generation.



I don’t want to spoil the story for you who have not read it.

I do want to share with you that Mackenzie did encounter “Papa”

in a way he had never expected.

And the weekend was about as life changing as anything one might imagine.

Mackenzie had an encounter that changed the way he held
so much in his heart – that he thought he could never change.

It even ushered me into another way of thinking about – no – not just thinking -
because it was on the emotional level –
about this thing called repent and forgive – the very thing
that John came out of his wilderness talking about.



Let's return to John and consider what his wilderness may have for us.
Wilderness is a place of learning and testing and passage.
In the Old Testament we learned that it was a place where God provides.
Let's think about the wilderness areas of our lives.

The story of John – that I have heard so many times -
came alive to me when I met Mackenzie Phillips.

The story is fiction –
but you know sometimes fiction can contain more truth than non-fiction.
I followed MacKenzie into a kind of crack in the universe
for a G-d and Christ and Spirit experience that showed him how
to redeem, recreate, rebirth his life after so terrible a loss.
I wonder if John's time in the wilderness
and his growing – his transformation was anything like MacKenzie's -
or anything like those we might have in the future.



The thing I really want to share with you today is that
this experience we are having on this earth
gives us many ways to live and grow and enjoy.
And there are mentors along the way. John the Baptist is one of them.
And if you read the book, the character of Mackenzie Phillips might also be one.

Out of the Wilderness— based on Mark 1:1-8
Aspen Community UMC and Christ Episcopal Church
December 7, 2008

Page 6 of 6

John comes out telling us these two things – repent and forgive -
which is a letting go of the ways we try to control or protect or justify
our habits and our lack of letting our lives flow with the wisdom God tries to give.
It is so easy to close down our hearts because so often life does hurt.
Yet, when we do that we shut out the joys. They just won't get in.
That's why John's message is important.

John comes showing us the face of G-d that we meet in Jesus.
And that makes a big difference for our own personal wilderness experiences.
You know what those are: those are the mistakes – sometimes big ones -
the failures – your losses and your griefs -
the doubts you have about your life
and if you are living the life you want to be living.

And one other thing – and that is what Jesus does.
He comes to John so that John can share the spirit as symbolized in the water.
Water seems often to have a place in G-d stories too.

Water represents the spirit which is purely a gift - of G-d's great love -
that we remember when we are baptized.
I think it is to help us know that life is not just about us.
Life is about being part of a bigger story – to share with each other – in a journey together.

So, remember John coming out of the wilderness – getting us ready for the first story of Jesus.

Can we let his wilderness experience – touch ours?
Can we let the grace and the hope that is part of John's message be a part of our lives?
Amen.

¹ Adapted from Rex Hunt. Advent: Clues to God in the Ordinary and Symbolic