

God Shows Up in the Wilderness

The Rev. Sarah Dunn
St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
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The First Sunday in Lent

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

And the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. May I speak to the name of the one God, lover, beloved love. Amen. Please be seated, friends. Y'all like it or not, ready or not, it's Lent. I don't know about you, but I have an aversion to Lent, but it seems to come up somehow every year at about this time. We seem to embark upon this threshold of being about to wander with Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. And y'all, I'm usually pretty hesitant. I'm usually not ready for a new spiritual discipline. I'm usually not ready for fasting and all those ashes and sackcloth and yada, yada yada. I'm averse to Lent, most of the time, and yet here we are again. The first Sunday in Lent, we are standing at the threshold with Jesus who is being driven out by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. I want to ask you for a second to imagine wilderness. Imagine wild spaces.

([01:27](#)):

What does it look like? What does it sound like? What does it smell like? How do you feel in those sacred landscapes? When we hear wilderness, we might immediately assume a barren desert. We might assume the top of an alpine mountain. We might assume it's a place with little human inhabitation, a place where there aren't many natural resources, a place where we would be surprised God's going to show up. And yet time and time again throughout our sacred scriptures, throughout our very lives, God shows up in the wilderness because God is present in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit drove Jesus into that wilderness. When I think of wilderness, I imagine the Isle of Iona off of the northwest coast of Scotland, the Celtic hub of Christianity in the UK. I remember when I was in my early twenties about to embark upon a study abroad seminary semester at Cambridge, I journeyed by myself on my first solo adventure as a young woman in her early twenties, backpacked by myself to Iona, Scotland.

([02:51](#)):

I remember being on this small island off in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean, and I wandered out of the 13th century stone abbey one night, and I sat on the steps and heard the waves crashing against the shore and the wind howling around me and tears began to stream down my face because all of a sudden, in a way I had never experienced before as an Army brat, I felt like I was home. I felt in that moment a connection, a deep rootedness with my ancestors who had come before me. I felt a connection with my God who was calling me into a new form of spirituality. I felt that God was in that wilderness with me. Flash forward six, seven years, the wilderness was the Amazon Rainforest in Ecuador. If you can imagine when you're trying to sleep in the rainforest, those bugs get real loud, y'all.

([04:00](#)):

The bugs, the insects that night, all that chitter-chatter were actually my companions, were actually my solace because that trip was the instigation for me to realize that my first marriage was really unhealthy, that my first marriage was tearing me down. That way was eating me alive. That trip in the midst of the insects, calming down my own racing thoughts because of their loud conversation in them, surprised to say God was in the wilderness offering me a moment of peace, as I began to take part in a year long discernment towards a divorce and claiming abundant life for myself. God was in the wilderness and

y'all, God was in the wilderness of my last home, the beautiful Lake Tahoe. God was on the top of Mount Rose at over 10,000 feet. God was kayaking over those crystal blue waters.

[\(05:15\)](#):

God was also there in the eight weeks of smoke that we experienced in the summer of 2021. I know y'all experienced a few days of that last summer. Imagine eight weeks of that kind of oppressive air quality. It was in that moment that I realized that I needed to put my family's health and my health and my own healing journey with the earth first and foremost. It began my discernment to come here to St. David's. Y'all, when our beloved William Frank Allen, our former rector, led me around this beautiful 40 acres and I saw a garden and I saw our arboretum and our outdoor chapel, wow. I thought maybe God is in this wilderness too. God is in the wilderness. God shows up time and time again in our sacred scripture, in wilderness moments.

[\(06:19\)](#):

Today's gospel reading is an illusion, is a reflection, is a symbol of what has happened previously in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Bible. We hear that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years, and then Moses led them through that Red Sea to the Promised Land, but y'all, they were not ready for it. They were not ready to claim their freedom, to claim their belovedness, to claim who God had created them to be and they complained. They said, "It's better for us to go back to Egypt than to hang out here in the wilderness." It's better to go back to a place of oppression, to lean into the discomfort, to lean into how God is transforming us, to lean into the Holy Spirit that's driving us out into the wilderness. Because y'all, it's easy to avoid those difficult feelings. It's easy to take the road around the wilderness, and yet the Holy Spirit drives us there, time and time again.

[\(07:29\)](#):

In those 40 years, God provides abundantly. God rains down manna from heaven. God provides water in that desert landscape. Y'all, God is, has been and always will be in the... Okay, we got it. And then in today's gospel from Mark, God again is in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and says, "You are my beloved son. With you, I am well pleased." That is an instigation moment for him. He is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. But there's more than just that 40 days of wilderness going on in Jesus' lifetime because the ancient Hebrews, the Israelite people, had been under the thumb of the oppressive Roman Empire. They found themselves enslaved yet again. Mothers of Jerusalem were watching their sons be crucified on wooden crosses. Life was terrifying.

[\(08:34\)](#):

And yet our God incarnate in the word may flesh and Jesus the Christ showed up in the wilderness, showed up in the form of a baby that was born in a barn, showed up in the form of a man who preached and taught throughout the region of Galilee to the poor and the oppressed, to women and men alike, to the marginalized and the young and old alike. God showed up in the wilderness. God does not abandon us in the wilderness, but instead we as disciples of Jesus, we as disciples of the Holy One might instead reframe what wilderness means for us. God was in the wilderness with blessed Absalom Jones, the first Black priest ordained in the Episcopal church, USA and whose feast day we celebrated on February 13th and with a lively service yesterday at Episcopal Academy. If you want to go back and watch the YouTube, I encourage you to, friends. But I want to articulate that God did not create the wilderness that was slavery in this country.

[\(09:56\)](#):

Human beings created that wilderness. But God was working in the wilderness that Absalom Jones experienced, that wilderness of realization that he was a valued, beloved son of God. The realization

that he too possessed human dignity, even though others chose to suppress him, oppress him, to put him under their feet and to enslave him in millions of others of our Black siblings. God was in the wilderness as he and other enslaved Africans sang songs that we will sing together like, "Let us bring bread together on our knees." And when they sing together in the field, "Wade in the water, wade in the water, children wade in the water, God's going to trouble the water." God showed up for Absalom Jones in the wilderness as he claimed his belovedness, and he claimed the belovedness of all the enslaved Africans in this country. God showed up again in the wilderness as he was taken from Delaware to the great city of Philadelphia, as he migrated with a person who had owned him to the city.

(11:33):

He worked diligently year after year after year until he bought his freedom at age 38. God was in the wilderness when he and other Black Christians were kicked out of their Methodist Episcopal church and the rest of the Black congregation walked out singing "We shall overcome." He founded the African Church of St. Thomas here in the great city of Philadelphia. Y'all, God was in the wilderness with Absalom Jones. I ask you, if God is in the wilderness in some of these dramatic harshest of places, where is God in the wilderness in your own life? How is God showing up in ways that are difficult and uncomfortable and trepidatious for you? Perhaps God shows up and you're mourning the end of a romantic relationship and you're wishing as one pop star says that you keep the Christmas lights up till January, I'm looking at you, Mikayla, but realizing that is not healthy for you in the long run.

(12:54):

Maybe your wilderness is grieving the death of someone you hold dear. Y'all, we live in a culture, we live in a society that tells us to avoid the grief, that mask. It with devices and social media and alcohol and drugs instead of encouraging us to engage with the grief. What if God was in that wilderness? What if we were vulnerable enough and fragile enough to admit with our siblings in Christ that we are struggling, y'all, that we don't have it all together? Maybe God might show up in the wilderness in our friends who are here at St. David who will love us in the midst of our mourning. Y'all, God is in the wilderness of depression. God is in the wilderness of those moments when we begin to realize that our self-worth isn't tied up with how big our house is, with how fancy our car is, with the clothes that are on our back, with the money that is in our bank account, with how fantastic our TikTok or Instagram reels are.

(14:05):

God is in the wilderness, a mental health crises, and they are the opportunity for us to reevaluate and discern that our self-worth is not deemed by what society views as success, but is deemed by what today's scripture says, that yes indeed, we are God's beloved children. Y'all, we are God's beloved children. God is in the wilderness. God is in the wilderness of things that we struggle to talk about with our neighbor. God is in the wilderness of hard, cultural conversations that we don't even know how to begin to navigate. God is in the wilderness when we bring up with our parents and our children and our friends, that we are concerned that there was another mass shooting at a Super Bowl party. God is in the wilderness as we prayed in the great litany that we hope that war and violence does not come upon us, but we also pray that for every beloved child of God on this planet, do we not? We pray and we mourn and we are grieved for the people of Ukraine, for the people of Congo and Sudan and for the people of Israel, Palestine, y'all.

(15:33):

We grieve at the rise in antisemitism, the rise in Islamophobia, the over 1200 Israelis murdered and the over 28,000 Palestinians murdered. We grieve because we follow the Prince of Peace who was all about love. But y'all, God is in the wilderness of those difficult conversations. God is in the wilderness of that

kind of transformation. God is in the wilderness of challenge, of discomfort, of difficult decisions. My friends, God has been in the wilderness always and forever and in this present moment. So this Lent, I invite us to lean in to that wilderness together, to not walk around it, to not avoid it, but to think that if we love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and if we love our neighbor as ourselves, how might that love remold us, reshape us, and transform us to be God's beloved children, to be vessels of God's abundant and steadfast love. This day and forevermore, God is with us in the wilderness. Amen.