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When I was a senior at Lancaster Mennonite the spring musical was Children of Eden. If none of you have ever heard of it, that's normal. It's a show by Stephen Schwartz (who also wrote Wicked and Godspell) and it follows the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah. If you ever get a chance to listen to the soundtrack --and I recommend that you do, just be prepared for some sweet 90s synthesizer -- you will find the song that has inspired this morning's message. Its title is the same as my sermon's, Lost in the Wilderness. This song has been stuck in my head for about the past month. It does that sometimes, just springs up out of nowhere, takes residence in the back of my mind and refuses to budge. I have started to notice a correlation in its appearance with my emotional/spiritual state. When I find myself retreating from the world, this song appears. *Lost in the wilderness, lost slowly dying in the wilderness, and if anyone's watching, boy, it seems they couldn't care less, we're lost in the wilderness.*

Being the church going folk you are, I'm sure you've heard plenty about the biblical concept of wilderness. I bet many of you could on the spot come up with at least a few theological metaphors related to wilderness themes. I'm not up here to reinvent the wheel or try to say something that has never been said before, I just want to share with you my personal experience of the wilderness and hopefully encourage those of you who may be lost or visiting there now.

In the Old Testament, the wilderness is a constant presence, reappearing time and again throughout the biblical narrative. Biblical literature is the literature of tradition, so the fact that wilderness is mentioned over 300 times in the text conveys a hefty cultural significance beyond a simple location or mere geographical designation. In fact, one of my seminary professors called this ever present wilderness "more of a character than a setting." I know this won't shock many of you, but the authors of these texts were not

interested in being historically accurate but were instead driven to put into writing the truth of their experience and ideology. Therefore these stories of wilderness experiences should be understood as theological constructions, not as historical records.

The theology that emerges from these many wilderness episodes is not one note, however one common theme does become apparent. Whether good or bad the wilderness is a place of intense experiences. Forty years of traveling in search of a promised land, a stark need for food and water and God's divine providence in the provision of manna. It is a place of isolation and danger, experienced deeply by Hagar and Ishmael as they fled for their lives and encountered a God of deliverance and protection. It is the place of renewal and tangible encounters with God. Entire theologies were built amongst the craggy steppes of the southern Levant where the people were exposed, alone or lost in the wilderness and yet somehow time and again met God in that very place.

What's interesting to me about the wilderness in the old testament is that it was not a place that was sought for say, rest and respite. Instead, it seems to me to be a place that you sought only out of necessity and often because you were fleeing from something. Imagery used to describe the wilderness was that of a desolate, unforgiving landscape which I suppose is why the writers in Psalms used it so often to describe the feeling of being separated from God.

Let us set aside these ancient understandings of wilderness; the dry desert hills and scrubby landscape, and instead evoke our own vision. What does this word "wilderness" stir in you? The pine barrens of NJ? The sandy dunes of New Mexico? The wild coast of Maine? The still waters of Crater Lake? Insert Ansel Adams landscape photo here??

I feel like wilderness is glorified and romanticized in modern culture. We long for untouched landscapes and brutal beauty. Have you ever dreamt of hiking the Appalachian Trail or visiting the wilds of Alaska? Do you hunt waterfalls and awe inspiring vistas?

Experiencing the raw beauty of the natural world can be a deeply spiritual experience. I'll never forget seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time and being completely struck silent for a full 30 minutes. I know, this seems impossible, but trust me, it's true.

I have often sought God in these wild places. While in college I had a certain bluff on Grandfather Mountain where I would climb, sit and sing out over the Blue Ridge Mountains. While living out west, I found my center at Ecola State Park and Haystack Rock. There was something about being in these wild, ancient places that allowed me to release everything I had been carrying and to just BE. Do you have a place like that?

When I think of these places, I feel refreshed and centered. How fortunate that our wildernesses are often safe, gated, staffed....and often offering restrooms. At least mine did. But oh, the spiritual wilderness. That is another thing altogether. That place is barren. Chafing. Relentless. That is a place that I have been even more frequently than my lovely natural oasis.

The wilderness of the spirit is the place of desolation lamented in the psalms. It is the place that is so unforgiving that John straight up wore camel's hair and ate locusts. I think about places like the Australian outback where I'm pretty sure you can die like, a million ways. That unforgiving place of the soul is not a respite or a place of refuge. It's hell. If scripture is to be taken literally (and I don't recommend that it is) it would make sense that Jesus met Satan out there.

In my college years, I found myself in this place. My faith had broken apart and I felt emotionally and spiritually barren. I was angry at God and longed for the childlike wonder that had once given me strength and the "fire" to take residence inside of me again. But it didn't come. It couldn't. There was no longer a place inside of me for it to be. I was lost.

Lost in the wilderness. Lost, slowly dying in the wilderness.

It was in this season that I began taking Biblical Greek. On the first day, THE FIRST DAY, my professor wanted to demonstrate how learning Greek could completely change your understanding of scripture. The verse he used was Mark 1:12. It read as follows:

Immediately the spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Kai euthus to pneuma auton ekballei eis ten eremon. The word of greatest significance in this line is ekballei. Cast him. Drove him. Sent him.

The word itself is not remarkable. It's used quite often, 81 times in fact. However, what is significant about this word is how it is used. Ekballo is the word used throughout the New Testament to describe casting out demons. It is a word of strength and in this text it denotes a violent rending, a tearing out with irresistible force. Jesus, the son, who in the preceding verses was descended upon by a dove while hearing "This is my son with whom I am well pleased" was violently, irresistibly driven into the wilderness, apart from his friends, his followers and his God. He was in the place of desperation and solitude.

JUST. LIKE. ME.

This new understanding broke over me and became a turning point in my life. If Jesus, the freaking son of God could be lost in the wilderness than there was hope for me. He was "tempted by Satan" - interpret as you will - he needed to be tended to (by angels and wild animals apparently). Basically, he was helpless. Jesus. JESUS!

This shift in understanding allowed me to view the emptiness of my spiritual brokenness as a place of possibility rather than one of death. I saw my wilderness not as a place of punishment but a place to reassess and reconnect. I'm thinking now about Death Valley, an unforgiving desert that once a year explodes with wild flowers.

A few months later I was home for Christmas break and at a gathering with my high school friends. Myself and another girl peeled off for some deeper conversation and we got into a

discussion about my spiritual wilderness journey. She was concerned but I told her about this ekballo thing and that it had made me feel so much peace. I remember summing it all up by saying “You know, you can’t get found unless you’re lost.” It just came out. And I knew it was the truth. Deep, resonating in my soul truth.

In my journey as a Christ follower I’ve found that there are a lot of surprises to this whole faith thing. There are things about Jesus that I read and kinda knew but didn’t necessarily think too much about. For instance, Jesus goes out into the wilderness a lot. It always bothered me actually. I thought, Hey, Jesus, these people need you. Why are you wandering away into the night and freaking everyone out? Why is praying more important than being there for the people who so obviously need you? But having been in my own place of finding peace in the wilderness, I get it now. That first time he was hurled into the desert was probably terrifying but he met God out there in a real and edifying way. He returned to the desert whenever he felt overwhelmed, got out of the noise and confusion of existence and just reconnect. To remember who he was.

We don’t always get to choose our times in the wilderness. Sometimes we are hurled there with what feels like violent, unforgiving force. Sometimes we seek it, in need of respite and recovery. But no matter how we get there, I implore you friends to remember that you are not there alone. Despite the desperate loneliness that can haunt us in this world, we are never truly alone. The ancient Israelites passed on this theological truth that the wilderness was a privileged place for encounters with the Divine. Jesus modeled it. I believe in it.

The last line of the song *Lost in the Wilderness* declares that “*there, in the wilderness, finally we’ll be found.*” I shared this song with Susan and in response she sent me a quote from Anne Lomott. It’s how I’ll leave you this morning.

I do not at all understand the mystery of grace,

Only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.