

Home Worship, February 21, 2021

Lenten Journey 1: a walk on the wild [erness] side

Centering Ourselves for Worship

As we prepare now to worship together while apart, I invite you to take three slow, deep breaths and allow your space to become worship space for this time. [*brief silence*]



Lighting of Candle

Light and warmth are returning to the land outside these walls. Light and warmth are represented in the light glowing from this flame. May the light of this candle remind us of the light and the warmth of Divine Presence through all the changing seasons.

Opening Music

Throughout These Lenten Days and Nights

<https://vimeo.com/507875614>

[James Gertmanian to a tune by Jean Strathdee, sung by Jean Strathdee]

Prayer

In days to come, Holy One, we will go with you through many a Lenten landscape. Your wisdom has much to teach us: about practicing Divine Presence; about costly commitment; about true sacred space; about deep transformation; about the path of simplicity and letting go. In each such lesson there is challenge and comfort - all we need to enter more deeply into sacred time, the sacred time of Holy Week and the sacred time of our faithful living. May we each find the Spirit-gifts we most need to make this journey with courage and openness. Amen.

Readings from Ancient and Modern Wisdom

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.'God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Poem

Desert Spaces

by Robert Frost [1874-1963]

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast.
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it - it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less -
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars - on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

Special Music

Ashes to Ashes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB_BMUZ4KkM

[Dan Schutte, on classic themes for the beginning of Lent- sung by St John 5 p.m. Choir]

Reflection

On spiritual landscape

When you or I are struggling emotionally or spiritually,
We can learn a lot by listening more deeply,
Closing our eyes,
And seeing what landscape comes to mind.
That landscape is our spiritual space

The Lenten landscape

The classic Lenten landscape is wilderness - or by times desert-
Today's Gospel calls it, in Greek, **eremos**- meaning an unpopulated, uncultivated place.
This wild deserted place is bigger than we are,
Beyond us in many ways,
Easy to get lost in,
Easy to get lonely in.
Easy to feel out of control in.
It speaks a foreign language .
It doesn't know our clocks, our calendars- time seems to stop.

If this is Lenten landscape, we've been there a long time

This Lenten landscape takes many forms- not all of them physical, not all of them involving actually going anywhere.

We've been there almost a year now,
Without even leaving home
We have given up much that makes us feel at home,
Much that connected us and supported us and gave us joy.

Speaking of learning

Since we've been living in Lenten lands so long, and will be there a while longer,
We might as well learn something.
As T.H. White puts into the mouth of the magician Merlin,
When life is hard, "learning is the thing for you".
What might Spirit invite us to learn about ourselves, about life, about God,
We'll be exploring Lenten lands deeply in these next weeks- seeking what wisdom and courage and consolation we can find.
Today two Bible stories and one modern poem to keep us company as we travel.

Starting with Jesus

This is the classic Lent story.
Mark goes in and out of it fast- we have to slow down to take it in.
Jesus gets baptized.
There's a heavenly message naming him beloved-
And then at once the Spirit drives him out , or throws him out, into a wild, deserted space-
Probably an actual desert.

There's a whole literature about desert, about wilderness- told by those who felt at home there or have sought it out.

But wild and deserted space was not where Jesus wanted to go.
The Spirit, the Breath, the Wind throws him out of the landscape he knows, away from any human society.
That would feel like divine punishment, not divine favour.

He is where he doesn't want to be.
He's with wild creatures,
He's tested, by the Adversary-
A personification of whatever works against us, tempts us , undermines us-
Other gospels spell out three was he gets tempted and tested,
Mark leaves it to our imagination.

And, Spirit doesn't give him a estimated day of departure-
Forty days is biblical shorthand for a long long time,
And when it begins, who knows when it will end.

No markers to tell time by, except tracking sunrises and sunsets,
No way to make a way in uncharted land,
No knowing where there's food or drink to be had.
Mark captures the loneliness, the desolation, in just one sentence.

You and I have been there - not physically but spiritually-
In this no-person's land we've been inhabiting nearly a year long-
Our calendars stripped of lunches and choir practices and meetings and coffee times and perhaps of
what we used to do for a living,
All of us thrown into isolation from at least some friends or family,
Trying to get our bearings in a life we don't know any more,
And yes, a lot of unstructured time and space alone with our inner demons whatever they may be,
Whatever we most deeply struggle with,
Perhaps ancient regrets surfacing-
Battling against the adversary named COVID along with whatever else we battle.

And here's another story of wild lonely space- definitely not desert!

Noah and family spend forty days cooped up in a makeshift boat surrounded by beasts of all kinds-
some wilder than others- most of them probably not smelling very good.
Bobbing about here and there on a vast expanse of floodwater,
Nature gone wild, out of control,
No way of knowing where one was, since familiar landscapes were submerged.
No way of doing anything about it but riding it out and hoping to stay afloat,
No control over when this will end.

COVID life has felt like that at times-
Each cooped up in our makeshift boat we are trying to steer through troubled waters-
what was a friendly benevolent world is now to be approached with caution,
Putting careful feelers out- whenever cases and restrictions go down-
Where do we feel safe going, what do we feel safe doing,
How do we, or how will we, find a way to befriend this world where pandemic lurks wherever we go?
And if we're sticking close to our little makeshift boats,
How do we find the strength and endurance to keep navigating a world that's become strange to us?

A modern story - the wilds of winter

Robert Frost writes of landscapes you and I know.

Sometimes friendly landscapes where one would gladly linger
"The woods are lovely, dark and deep"

Sometimes they are Desert Places as in today's poem:
Snowfall, nightfall,
Signs of life disappearing,

Even the animals are smothered by snow- they can't get out even if they want to.
The poet feels absent of mind -
He can't count or track anything around him-
And it's as if he doesn't count either, what's one lone person amid this snow-buried vastness?
He feels a vast loneliness, an emptiness- that's going to get even bigger even deeper even lonelier.
There's a lot of winter and a lot of night yet to come.
And a monotony to it- no expression in words, no expression on faces-
No words, no faces.
A sense of emptiness even in the night sky-
Even more so for us today-
Now that we know the universe is expanding, there's more space between stars than there used to be,
Now that we know that much is dark matter, dark energy beyond our seeing and knowing.
Doesn't this feel a lot like COVID life especially in the dead of winter?
And so too, in the last verse, where it turns out the winter, the night, the desert are buried within the poet,
Just as everything familiar and expressive seems to be buried under that night, that winter, that desert
Whether outside the poet or within him.
If you have struggled with loneliness, anxiety, sadness, depression amid this lonely and monotonous season,
Then that last verse was written for you.
You are in good company.

So where are the ministering angels in our wintry, deserted wilds?

Just a few thoughts for now and more in weeks to come- I promise!

God's messengers are with us.
In stories of kindness which don't always make the news.
I think of those among us who headed out to bring soup or Valentine treats to cheer those at home alone.
Or who have written letters and picked up the phone or done good turns,
And those among us who persevere in prayer -
Who will hold any of us and anyone else in Love and Light as needed.
These are the stars that shine.
These are the unexpected springs of water in the desert.
These are the doves

God's messengers are with us in the storytellers, the poets, who remind us others have passed this way before,
And lived to tell the tale,
Jesus got out of the desert.
Noah and family stepped onto dry lands.
Robert Frost made his winter wilderness into words to assure you and me that we don't walk alone.
And in this way - and more- we glimpse God's covenant- God's promise to be with us in every wild deserted lonely space, be it physical or spiritual,
Holding us up , helping us take the next step, and helping beloved community live on,
So that others after us will find: "We are not alone".
May this promise shine a light for us as bright and beautiful as a rainbow for all God's rainbow people and creatures.

May it be so!

Music for Reflection

We Are Not Alone

<https://vimeo.com/461677650>

Jim Strathdee, performed by Jim and Jean Strathdee with Chris Allan [saxophone]

Offering Prayer

O Bright Rainbow Presence, we trust in the colours and depths of your promises, even when we do not know what else to trust. We trust that we and all your creatures are held gently in your infinite Compassion. And so we can live, love and share beyond the limits of our fears. Through all that we have, all that we are, may we be messengers of your love in places of physical, emotional and spiritual hunger. And so we give what we have and what we are, that others too may find a way in their wilderness times and places. May it be so!

The Community at Prayer

Restless, searching God, your Spirit accompanies us in the land called Barren, the land called wilderness, the land we cannot name.

We seek to find the wilderness wisdom for the times of unknown, the times of in-between, the times when the life we knew has gone and we have not yet discovered the life we are to take up.

May we learn the lessons of letting go-

May we live courageously and patiently with loss, facing the pain, keeping open and tender hearts-
As we trust that you are always with us, the ground of our being, the breath of our spirit, the light in the thick darkness.

In these times of change and unknown, our church also has lived through many changes,
Old ways of being church are passing,
The church of the future is yet to emerge,
We live in the in-between,
Watching and praying for the wisdom we need,
Messengers of mercy along the way.

In this beloved world, many communities wander in the wilderness too-
Sometimes far from a healing, hopeful path,
Caught in the grip of violence and discord,
Sometimes glimpsing new life and hope, but with a long unknown way ahead.
We pray for the gifts of patience, forbearance, compassion and generosity, in struggling communities ,
in places of trouble and turbulence, everywhere.

God of all faithfulness, we lean upon your steadfast love in desert times and place.
We often find this love in unexpected forms from unexpected people.
And we seek this same love for those who face loss, illness or loneliness,
May that Love touch those among us and those known to us, as we hold them in Love and Light in a moment of silent prayer.

These and all our prayers we gather into our prayer of beloved community: Our Father [or Creator] etc.

Announcements, Joys and Concerns

Jane will get back to anyone who contacts her to express interest in a Lent study- format, email or Zoom, to depend on who's interested. This week the usual routine: Thurs. Facebook Live. Friday coffee Zoom gathering at 10 a.m. [same Zoom as you received for this Sunday's service- note it's no longer available via the website] and Sun. Feb. 28 Zoom worship at 10 a.m. with a home service also provided.

Closing Music

Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAN4EojeF0Y>

[Williams/Hughes, sung by Huddersfield Choral Society with some rousing musical accompaniment]

Blessing and Sending Forth

Let us go forth, walking this Lenten way while we must, seeking the Light, learning the lessons this season holds for us. And may we trust that Beloved Community is always near at hand and that good news is born among us even in the wilderness.

Sharing the Light

And as we leave this space and time of worship, the light goes with us. Light and Love will not fail us even in this time of Lenten journey toward brighter days to come.

Centering words from Susan Lukey and candle lighting words adapted from Peter Chynoweth from Gathering L/E/P 2021. Other prayers by Jane. Jane thanks Edward Hirsch [How to read a poem and fall in love with poetry] for introducing her to today's poem and guiding her reading of it.

Tax Receipts and 2020 Annual Report

Tax Receipts will be available for pick up at Wesley (Upper Hall) on Monday, February 15th 2-4 pm Tuesday, February 16th 10-12 pm and 2-4 pm
If not picked up, your tax receipt will be mailed.

In an effort to reduce costs and paper, the **Wesley United 2020 Annual Report (draft)** will be emailed. If we have missed you or you prefer a paper copy please email us at wesleyunitedstandrews@gmail.com. There will be printed copies available at the church. Our Congregational Annual Meeting will be scheduled at a later date.