

For the last 40 days, we have been exploring our own wilderness times with Jesus as our guide and example. After his time of fasting in the barren places of his world, he emerged to begin a new endeavor, his public ministry throughout Judea and Samaria. When we encounter our own wilderness times, we also discover that the wilderness is a time of new beginnings for us as well. Another way to think of it is that wilderness times are temporary. I remember a retired pastor in a church I served in telling me that one of his favorite phrases in scripture is found more than four hundred fifty times in the Bible:

“It came to pass.”

That can be very good news, if you're contemplating wilderness time. Wilderness times come. But, they don't stay. They are not permanent. They pass. Wilderness time always comes to an end and is always followed by a new beginning. We can always remember that if we are still alive today, that means we, in fact, have pulled through and survived the wilderness times of our past, no matter how difficult they seemed at the time. According to Dante, written over the gates of hell are the words, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here!” Sometimes we imagine that those words are written over the gate to the wilderness and we are tempted to abandon hope. The good news of our Christian faith, however, is that the wilderness is never the final destination and hope is alive even in that desolate territory.

Wilderness times generally mark the end of one phase and the beginning of a new phase of our lives. Jesus' difficult and lonely time of testing in the Judean wilderness gave way to a new beginning — the beginning of his public ministry. It

prepared him and strengthened him for it in a way that perhaps nothing else could. New beginnings stand at the heart of the gospel message. No matter who we are or what we've done, no matter if the wilderness is of our own making, God is present in the wilderness with us and can lead us through it and out of it. When we find ourselves in the wilderness of sin, guilt, and separation from God and from others, there is a way out of the wilderness and a new beginning. God provides that way in Christ. The apostle Paul was an expert in new beginnings. He knew well the spiritual territory we call "the wilderness" because he spent a great deal of time there! Paul also knew the power of being made new and set free from the wilderness of a broken relationship with God and with others. Paul wrote, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:

everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,

and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,

not counting their trespasses against them,

and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us".

The good news of Christ is that no matter who you are or what you have done, there is always held out to you the chance for a new beginning. In Christ, we are new creations: "Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Jesus journeyed through the wilderness and came out the other side, stronger and ready to begin his public ministry. Now we join him at the end of that ministry in our Gospel lesson today. The scene we are presented with is

what appears to be his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish world of that time. The crowds gathered and cheered him, shouting “Hosanna” which loosely translated, literally means “save us” as well as proclaiming that “blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.” We often picture this seen as something grand and exultant, and the mood was joyous. But to see Jesus as entering as a conquering ruler, is to really miss the flavor of that scene. Unlike a noble king, he was riding a young colt, not a magnificent steed. He was attended by a ragtag bunch of social nobodies, with no major force marching behind him.

Now we can contrast that scene in the east of the city with one that was occurring in the west. There the power of Rome was on full display, with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, the face of the Emperor for Palestine, entering on a majestic steed with legions of cavalry and soldiers, banners flying, drums keeping the marching cadence as this grand military parade passed. Pilate is making a statement. This is the might and power that will crush you if you step out of line.

Passover was a tense time, a risky holiday observance for keeping the peace of Rome, the Pax Romana. After all, it was an observance of the liberation of Israel from the oppression of the Egyptians. So it kind of made you think about your current situation, being yet again oppressed by the Romans, and thinking how you can free yourself again. So Pilate wasn't in town to enjoy the festivities, he was there to ensure order, brutally if necessary. When Jesus was greeted with joyous Hosannas by the Jerusalem crowd, those people were really seeking

to be saved from their own wilderness, the brutal oppression of the Romans, maintained through the Temple and ruling classes of Judea. Jesus was, in effect, stepping into a wilderness time again. A desperate time of trial and tribulation.

These people were looking to him to deliver them from their own wilderness, through power and violent transition.

That's not the new beginning he had to offer, was it?

Yet he wasn't just quietly riding into town without a plan either. The scripture makes it clear every choice that day was by design. The choice of a young colt, the humble way he proceeds. Any Jew present would have made the connection to the prophecy in Zechariah 9, where "your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a colt... he will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem." Those observing would expect some cataclysmic conclusion that would wipe the threat of war from among them, that would in some fashion decimate their Roman overlords. Jesus would have known the words of Zechariah. He was not a puppet in some divinely scripted drama whose text was written from eternity.

Theologian Marcus Borg reflects that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a staged "political demonstration" serving as an "indictment of the Temple as a center of nationalist resistance: against the Roman occupation. A "king" making his procession on such a slow and lowly beast can hardly be understood to be inspiring violent resistance. One could even argue that this procession is a form of guerilla theater, poking fun at the Romans in the very contrasts between the procession of Jesus and that of Pilate. And it's interesting that at the end of that

day, Jesus makes his way for a brief visit to the Temple, took a quick look around, and left the city for the night. Then first thing the next day, low and behold, he returns to the Temple to stage another demonstration. One has to wonder if that too, was planned.

Jesus is entering the final wilderness of his mortal life, yet at the same time he is setting the stage for a new beginning. He is bringing his message and image of a different kingdom to the very center of religious and economic power in Jerusalem. A kingdom not founded on the strength of violence and oppression. A kingdom which is the opposite of the might of Rome, or the violence of the Davidic kings. His is a kingdom of humility, one which chooses a young donkey over a majestic stallion. One that resists evil and oppression through nonviolent action, by mocking that very power in a peaceful parade, or through the turning over of tables to make a point. The point that this wilderness is not the end of the story. There is hope on the other side. But that hope is not achieved through some apocalyptic, cataclysmic resolution, rather it is accomplished through the humble acts of a suffering servant, one who knows the wilderness well, and has been forged in the barren loneliness that the wilderness often brings.

Like those people on that first Palm Sunday, we too find ourselves in wildernesses that we desperately seek a way out of, wildernesses of our own lives, compounded by the imposed wildernesses of the oppressors of this world. And like those ancestors, we are seeking one who will save us, one we can shout Hosanna to. Yet do we also seek the same misguided conclusion to our suffering as they did in ages past? A savior arriving in majestic grandeur to do

battle with the forces that beset us?

Or is our savior still the humble man on an unassuming donkey foal? Do we seek to be part of or in collusion with the empire that oppresses or do we follow our savior's example and take actions to show what the true kingdom of God looks like? To listen to the news, it would seem that we find ourselves further and further in the wilderness. Yet there are always signs of hope. This weekend millions marched in opposition to gun violence, led by the youth of our culture, their own version of a palm parade. What procession can we orchestrate? How can we follow in the footsteps of our savior, here and now, to bring the kingdom of heaven closer to fruition in this world? We have a choice. We can sit idly by and seek the warrior king to march in and rid us of our wilderness through might and power or seek the suffering servant whose weapon is the peaceful pursuit of justice through action, the action of his body still at work in the world. You know, we are that body. But the good news of our faith is that the wilderness never has the last word.

We know the wilderness Jesus was entering, we know how that story ends.

When Jesus was on the cross, he was in the darkest wilderness of his life. Jesus was nailed to that cross to die as a criminal, as the example of the justice that this world has to offer. As Jesus hung there, the life draining from him, he experienced the rejection, the anguish, and the loneliness of the darkest wilderness. Jesus cried out, quoting Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But, we know that the cross was not the end. We, who will walk the wilderness

way with Christ through this Holy Week of services, know what we celebrate next Sunday. We know that death will never have the final word, that the wilderness ways of the powers and principalities of this world are not the end of the story. We know that the wilderness “comes to pass.” We have the opportunity to take advantage of the new beginning that Jesus modeled for us. I pray that we choose to live into that new reality of hope in Christ, as his body, and oppose the imposed wildernesses of this world. Amen.