

## Lions, Tigers and Bears! Oh, My!

In the movie “The Wizard of Oz” the four characters (Dorothy, Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion were walking through the forest and were heard proclaiming:” Lions and Tigers and Bears–Oh My!” They were walking in fear of the unknown, they were on a wilderness journey in a land called Oz.

It may seem odd talking about the Wizard of Oz in a sermon but often the world recognizes its deepest needs and often presents those needs in song or movie. Now the film the “Wizard of Oz” was released in 1939, some 82 years ago and its most popular song “Over the rainbow” and the movie itself remain popular today.

To many secular people God seems to be like a man behind a curtain ready to punish and reject all who dare to approach Him. But the God I know is not like that at all. Today there is still a veil in place (like a curtain) that separates people from the Lord because of fear or misunderstanding of God. In Lent we reflect, take stock on ourselves and our relationship with God and prepare ourselves for the celebration of Easter.

The gospel of Mark is one of the earliest of the narrative gospels and it is the shortest. Mark’s goal as a gospel writer, was to show Jesus as the One who willingly became a servant, sent to serve God’s people. This morning’s text from Mark tells us only that Jesus has

left home, got baptized and went to the wilderness. Let's explore wilderness journeys, on this first Sunday in Lent 2021.

At some point we all leave home; it is something we do throughout our lives. The first time I left home, I was angry with my parents so I packed a suitcase and walked down the driveway, and the farther I got from home the more fear replaced determination. Luckily, when I heard my mother calling me for lunch, my five-year-old self determined that my wilderness experience should end immediately. It may have been the first time I left home, but it was not to be the last.

Over and over, we leave home. We've all done it, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually. We leave those places that are familiar, comfortable, predictable. Sometimes we can't wait to leave. We're ready to go. Other times we would rather not leave. Sometimes we choose to leave. Other times the circumstances of life push us out the door. No matter how or why it happens, leaving home is part of life. It happens in lots of different ways and times.

It might be the first day of school or going to summer camp for children. Moving out of their parent's home to start post secondary education or going to work for young people. A marriage, a divorce, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one all the significant changes of life are forms of leaving home. Whether it be new employment or loss of employment both are about leaving home.

Re-locating to a new town (even one called a “jewel in the wilderness”), retirement, the loss of health all involve leaving home. The big decisions that bring us to the crossroads of life are also about leaving home.

As difficult, frightening and risky as leaving home can be. It also invites us to change and opens us to new discoveries about ourselves. Our understandings of where we find significance, meaning and security are all confronted. Leaving home is the beginning of our spiritual journey and growth. When we leave home, we are more vulnerable to and in need of God.

As much as leaving home is about the simple circumstances of life; it is the way of God’s people. Adam and Eve left the garden. Noah left his dry land home. God told Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1). Jacob ran away from home fearing for his life. Moses and the Israelites left their home in Egypt. And in today’s gospel Jesus has left home. Leaving home is about simple circumstances of life, but it also the way of God’s people.

Mark tells us that “Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee” to the Jordan River. Having left home, he stands with John in the Jordan, the border between home and wilderness. There he is baptized. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit like a dove descends, and a voice declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Baptism may happen in the river but the baptismal life begins in the wilderness for all of us.

This story is about Jesus yes, but it is our story too. God’s words refer to Jesus in an individually literal way, but they apply to each of us. By grace, gift, and the choice of God we are his beloved children. If leaving home, getting baptized, and going to the wilderness is Jesus’s way then it is our way too. Our old identity is left behind, we are identified and claimed by God as his children, and we go to the wilderness too. Lent is about leaving home and leaving home, in Lent and Life, always takes us to the wilderness.

The wilderness is an in between place a threshold of sorts. Neither here nor there. We have left behind what was and what will be is not yet clear. In the wilderness we come face to face with the reality of our lives; things done and left undone, our fears, our hopes and dreams, our sorrows and losses, as well as the unknown. This year our wilderness is coloured by the COVID-19 Pandemic, so we are most definitely betwixt and between in many ways. These facts of life are the source of our temptations.

We often think of temptations as external and make them about behaviour. Giving up something or limiting our indulgences. While behaviour is important the real temptations are from within us not around us. We are either tempted to believe we are more or less

than the dust of God's creation, or we are tempted not to trust God's willingness to get his hands dirty in the dust of who we are. The temptations are not really about behaviour, breaking rules, or being bad. God does not tempt us to see if we will pass or fail. The temptations are for our benefit, not God's. They are part of our salvation. We leave home and experience wilderness temptations to discover that our most authentic identity is a beloved child of God and our only real home is with God.

This wilderness is unknown territory for us. In our wilderness the old structures, the ones we left behind, no longer contain, support or define our life. This is not however, uncharted territory. The way has already been cleared by Jesus. It is the way home, the way to God. We go into our wilderness with the knowledge and confidence that Christ has gone before us.

For you and me, for all of us leaving home is not so much a loss for us but an opportunity for God. In the wilderness our illusion of self-sufficiency is surrendered to God, our helplessness opens us to God's Grace, and our guilt is overcome by God's compassion. That is what happens when you leave home.

We can never escape or avoid the wilderness. Like, Jesus we must go through it. We must face temptations and be with wild beasts. Lions, and Tigers and Bears! Oh, My. These animals may in fact be the least of the perils we shall meet in the wilderness. Yet we never go

alone. The angels that ministered to Jesus will be there for us. *"Remember who you are,"* is their message. *"You are a beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased."* Over and over, they tell us. They remind us they encourage us and reassure us.

As we remember who we are, as we have that remembrance, as we are reassured, the wild beasts are banished the wilderness recedes. We take steps towards God. Step after step. *"I am a beloved child of God. With me he is well pleased."*

Let that become your wilderness mantra. Let those words fill our minds, tumble from our lips, and occupy our hearts. The truth of those words is the way home and the way forward out of the wilderness.

Amen.