

Lent 1B 2018, February 18, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

“And the Spirit immediately drove (Jesus) out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

I am a great fan of the television series “Survivorman.” It’s no longer being produced, but you can certainly catch re-runs on the Science channel and Discovery channel. The star, producer and writer of the show is Les Stroud, a Canadian film-maker and survival expert. The premise of the show centers on Les Stroud being dropped into a remote and uninhabited wilderness area where attempts to survive on his own for seven days before he can be rescued. All he brings with him is a multi-tool and maybe just a little food like a candy bar or just a little water. He isn’t accompanied by anyone else, and all the filming is done by himself.

What I find compelling about the show is Stroud’s honest about how hard trying to hang on for seven days in the wilderness can be. Loneliness, self-doubt about one’s ability to cope under duress, the physical and emotional toil simply trying to stay alive, can derail staying calm and rational and focused; all necessary components to surviving. To be sure, it’s still a television show, and there is a production team of people ready to swoop in if necessary if Les Stroud gets in a truly life-threatening situation. Still, it makes for compelling drama, and will probably be the closest I’ll ever come to being stranded in an African desert or northern Canadian forest or South American jungle days away from any human contact.

The wilderness. The word evokes strong emotions. Most commonly defined as any natural area with little or no human contact or impact. A few thousand years ago most of the earth’s surface could be considered wilderness. Humans clung to coasts and along rivers. In the forests, in the jungles, in the deserts roamed wild beasts, harsh conditions, unpassable terrain. Today it’s estimated that only one quarter of the earth’s area can be classified as wilderness. In the United States only five percent is officially designated wilderness area, most of that in the state of Alaska. Because so little of Earth’s area is wilderness we now tend to romanticize it. We think of the wilderness as the last pure area of earth remaining, untouched and unstained by human hands which often bring pollution, destruction of natural beauty and cause extinction of rare plants and animals.

I think that’s why I like the show Survivorman so much. It doesn’t romanticize the wilderness. Far from it. In a very short, and you might even say cursory way, Les Stroud reminds us the wilderness is a dangerous place and can quickly strip away any pretensions we might have that we are masters of our environment. The wilderness is a dangerous place. You only go there unless you have to.

Our gospel writer Mark gives us the shortest version of Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness. Absent are the specific temptations Satan offers Jesus. Mark doesn’t tell us how Jesus reacted or how he fared under such harsh conditions. But the details he gives us are compelling and they give us much to hold onto as we face the wilderness areas in our own lives.

Mark tells us three things: 1. Jesus didn’t choose the wilderness. 2. The struggle was long. 3. There are angels in the wilderness.

First, Jesus wasn’t setting up a television production like Survivorman does when he goes into the wilderness. He didn’t choose to go there. The Spirit drove him there. You only go there if you have to.

This detail has a ring of truth to it. We don't voluntarily go into the wilderness. We don't sign up for pain or loss or danger or grief. But the wilderness happens. It often finds us. It may happen in a hospital room or a troubled relationship or an anxiety attack or a sudden death. The wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome. And can we ponder this for just moment, it is often God who leads us into those dangerous, desolate places. Now, having said that I don't believe God wills pain or disaster on any of us. But sometimes our journeys take us to dark and forboding places because we live in a fragile, even broken, world where evil and temptation occur. Does that mean God can redeem even the wilderness and our journey there can be a holy experience? Yes, I believe so. But again, we don't want to romanticize the wilderness we find ourselves in.

Second, Jesus' struggle was long. Mark says "forty days" which is one of those Biblical numbers that can easily be read as "a long time." Survivorman spends seven days in the wilderness and you can see the joy on his face when after just a week his rescue team swoops in and takes him home to a nice hot shower and steak dinner. We don't know what it was like for Jesus. Did he get hungry? Did he begin to doubt himself? Did each night stretch out endlessly and was that the time, in the wee hours of the morning when it seems like day will never come that Satan played all those little tricks in his mind as he is wont to do? We live in a quick fix culture. We want the cure tomorrow, the fast acting pill today, the official on the other end of the telephone to solve our problem immediately. Maybe this fast-paced, solve-it-now life we are living is itself a kind of wilderness into which we have been driven. Driven by our own wants and needs and desires. How do we slow down and begin to listen for the gracious words of God's Spirit in a wilderness of frenetic and unceasing noise?

Third, angels waited on Jesus. This simple statement startles me to attention; this unexpected yet comforting truth. Somehow, somewhere help comes. I wonder how Jesus experienced his angels? Maybe a gently trickle of water on a parched tongue. A cool breeze blowing on a hot night. A brilliant display of stars in the heavens illuminating a dark night. What do your angels look like? How have they come to you in the past? How have they held you in trying times or comforted you in distress? And having been comforted how have you been angel to others?

There's one other detail concerning Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness we need to pay attention to. A detail so important for our own understanding of what it means to wander in the wildernesses we will encounter. Mark tells us Jesus was driven into the wilderness immediately after his baptism. When he rose out of the waters he immediately heard the voice of his Father declare, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus is named and claimed as the Beloved Son of the Father in baptism. It's in Baptism Jesus, and us, receive our true identity. Before we do anything else in life, before we do anything wrong or anything right, God names us and claims us as his own. And then almost immediately other things try to test our identity, telling us who we are and claiming us as their own. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.

We belong to God. That's number one. We are named child of God in Holy Baptism. But then, almost immediately we are driven into the wilderness which is life. Here we are tempted to give up our true identity and pursue other paths. But the Spirit of God, who drives us here, remains with us, strengthening us and ministering to us through angelic ways, reminding us always of our true identity; "you are beloved, child of God, fear not the wilderness, you belong to me." Amen.