

YOUR WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church of Newport on November 7, 2010

Sooner or later most of us will go on a wilderness journey. The journey I have in mind does not take us into the national park system. We won't need to bring along bug dope, a flashlight or a snakebite kit. The only beasts we'll encounter will be those created by our own hopes and our fears. These will be the beasts, which populate that wilderness of everyone's imagination, the internal beasts that puzzle or frighten nearly all of us.

Why would anyone take such a journey? Frankly I'd rather stay home. But, usually we don't have much choice. It may be that a serious illness starts us on our way or it may be the loss of the job. It may be the breakup of a marriage or a time of testing for our families. It may be the death of a family member or of a close friend or it may be the betrayal of a false friend that hits us more seriously than most.

It may be reaching that classic mid-point of our lives where we begin to look at our life options differently and we look at our time left differently. Perhaps none of this will happen to you, but my guess is most people who have lived awhile will recognize in their own experience elements of what I am going to describe.

For some of us this journey will present a crisis of caring or trust or a crisis of our ability to love others. I find this, for instance, in Dante's "The Inferno," a story about the poet's trip through Hell. This Fourteenth Century classic begins with the words, "Midway" – note mid-way -- "on Life's journey, I found myself in the dark woods, the right road lost."

When Dante wrote "The Inferno" he was actually at the mid-point of his own life. The betrayal of false friends and former colleagues had caused him to question everything he had once believed. He imagined that he was chased down into a vast hole by wild beasts that threatened to tear him limb from limb. He passes beyond a sign reading, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," and then he knows that he has reached the outer suburbs of Hell. This is his wilderness journey.

Descending into the Hellish pit he finds the trail winds downward like a canyon in the shape of a corkscrew. The upper, less severe circles of the canyon are populated largely by people whose prevailing sin has been only that they sometimes lost self-control. They acted hastily or without thinking.

In lower circles are the folks who responded too often out of anger. They were known for their anger and were even proud of it. Lower still were those sins

that were more calculated than passionate: the sins of cheats, thieves, seducers and liars.

Lowest and worst of all were those whose sins involved carefully winning the deepest trust of other people and then betraying it. The temperature in Dante's Hell drops dramatically where it houses people with a diminished capacity for caring. At the lowest level are those who have killed in themselves all love for others. Their souls are encased in ice.

Our own journeys begin with anger or rejection sometimes. They touch on deception and they toy with indifference. We cycle through resentment and sadness, because we are not happy to be in this wilderness. We are sure we shouldn't have to be in this place. Partly in response to those unpleasant feelings we cycle through temptations to deceive other people or through even greater temptations to deceive ourselves.

And it is at the final level -- where indifference or disguise or self-deception become so easy -- that if we were lucky we turned away and headed back slowly toward the light. Dante's classic descent into and escape from Hell has often been read as a Christian allegory, but it can also be read as a story of the psyche or the soul struggling to survive in a world that is both devious and beautiful, and where we can be tempted by both. We have to learn how to give up the false security of deceiving others and ourselves in order to be worthy of receiving -- their love.

Sometimes, our wilderness journey responds to challenges the world presents to us directly. This is what Jesus' wilderness journey was all about. It is first of all a metaphorical journey, which many of us might recognize as a good description of the mid-life crisis. It came at a high point in Jesus life just after John baptized him. Then Mark tells us the Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness where Satan tempted him, and he was with the wild beasts (those wild beasts again), but the angels watched over him. And that is all that Mark tells us as though Mark believes wild beasts and temptations happen to everyone as I suspect they do.

Mathew and Luke tell us the fuller story, and reading between the lines we suddenly know what is happening here that happens also to us. The first time Satan appeared to Jesus in the wilderness he said "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." The temptation was not to do a magic trick by turning stone into bread. The emphasis was on the word IF as in IF you are the Son of God then PROVE it to us."

Sooner or later we have to put away the idea that we have to prove ourselves to a crowd of real or imaginary observers. That is one of the great challenges of growing up. As young men and women we often imagined that we were playing to a crowd that was relentlessly critical of our performance. Who

knows if there was a crowd of observers or if they really were that critical? (Once when I was a lot younger minister, an older colleague said to me, "It may be of some comfort to you to know that the vast majority of your parishioners probably do not think of you at all during the week.)

Nevertheless believing that we do play to a crowd of critics we want to please them. We want to say, "What will it take? What do I have to do to win your approval? When do I get to hear your applause?" And it is the wrong question. Because the only real applause or assurance we can expect must come either from within ourselves or from a source that really already knows and loves us as we are. The first temptation that Jesus resisted was the temptation to allow himself to be defined by his need for approval.

Satan's next temptation was "I will give you all of the power and the glory that you want if you will fall down and worship me." The imaginary audience does not applaud, but instead it keeps laying down new conditions that must be met before their approval will be gained. Just do this one thing more. Just climb a little higher on that ladder. The power and glory you receive will be your applause.

Jesus declines this opportunity as well because he knows that even the highest recognition that the world can give us -- political, economic or religious -- will not offer us the ultimate assurances we want that our lives are important. Honors and recognition count for very little on the scale of what brings happiness. Real assurance and peace must come from within.

In the third temptation Satan once again poses the great IF. IF you are who you say you are jump down from this high place and float over the valleys below. Perhaps this is the temptation to believe that nothing really matters but one's own pleasure. If you can't win politically, if people won't appreciate you as much as you think they should, why not just live for yourself. Why not live only to make yourself happy?

This is the tough one. This is the point where we say, "Aw the heck with it. You can't fight city hall because nobody cares. Why keep beating your head against the walls or trying to rouse troops that won't even make the effort to save themselves? This is the temptation that forces us to decide if we do want to live by ends and goals that are beyond our self-interest. Do we want to live as a stream, flowing into and feeding other lives, or do we want to live as a quaking bog?

Sooner or later we all take a journey in which we test ourselves against what is unknown. If taking this journey sounds all very brave and daring, let me assure you that no one wants to go. No one really is ready for it. Moses ran away from his troubles and found an uncomplicated life caring for his father in

law's sheep in a country far away from Egypt. Suddenly a burning bush flared up beside him, and told him to return to Egypt and take his people out of slavery.

Moses didn't want to do that. He had found ways to be, at least happy, and winning freedom for others wasn't high on his list of priorities. When God (or life) said to him, "Look, I'm giving you a chance to grow up," Moses responded, "Well, I don't know that I want to grow up. It's too hard." God said, in effect, "What made you think you had a choice. Go, and I will be with you."

Well, the Spirit of Life may have sent Moses and his people into the wilderness, but the Spirit wasn't obviously there for them every time they wanted reassurance. When they were thirsty, they were directed to some water, but reaching the land flowing with milk and honey was withheld from them for a long time. When they were hungry they were directed to some food, but it was not the great banquet they expected every time they turned around. When they sought reassurance and direction they were told to elect leaders they trusted and then let them lead. That took some leap of faith.

Most of our journeys as well will require a leap of faith from what we know about ourselves and life to what we hope will be true. While I was traveling through my own personal surgical wilderness – several years ago -- I wish I could say that I found angels guiding me or voices reassuring me that everything was going to work out the way I wanted it to work out. That did not happen.

Most of the time what I did experience was a feeling that taking one day at a time, I could handle whatever was coming and that whatever happened would be all right. So, if I was led it was not firmly by the hand, but by gentle taps and pushes along the way. I don't know where those taps came from. As Wendell Berry said, "Make of that what you will."

Sometimes we deliberately enter the wilderness to test our abilities to find our way out. Parker Palmer, a well-known Quaker educator, once wrote about taking an Outward Bound course to test himself. One day, he found himself leaning backwards out over a 110 foot cliff with a rope and harness over his body. In his own words now, "I was told to lean out over God's own emptiness and walk down the face of that cliff to the ground 11 stories below.

"I remember the cliff too well. It started with a five foot drop to a small ledge, then a ten foot drop to another ledge, then a third and final drop all the way down. (On the first drop) my feet instantly went out from under me and I fell heavily to the first ledge. The instructor observed astutely "I don't think you quite have it yet. You are leaning too close to the rock face. You need to lean back farther so that your feet will grip the wall."

"That advice, like the advice of some spiritual traditions, went against my every instinct. Surely one should hug the wall, not lean out over the void. But on the second drop I tried to lean back, better but not far enough and I hit the

second ledge with a thud not unlike the first. “You still don’t have it,” said the ever-observant instructor. “Try again.”

“Since my next try would be the last one her counsel was not especially comforting. But try I did, and much to my amazement I found myself moving down the rock wall. Step by step I made my way with growing confidence until, about half way down, I suddenly realized that I was heading toward a very large hole in the rock, and – not knowing anything better to do — I froze.

“The instructor waited a small eternity for me to thaw out, and when she realized I was showing no signs of life she yelled up, “Is anything wrong Parker?” as if she needed to ask. To this day I do not know the source of the childlike voice that came up from within me, but my response is a matter of public record. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“The instructor yelled back, “Then I think its time you learned the Outward Bound motto.” Wonderful, I thought. I am about to die, and she is feeding me bromides. But then she spoke words I have never forgotten, words so true they empowered me to negotiate the rest of the cliff without incident. “If you can’t get out of it, get into it.”

Perhaps the wilderness journey nearly all of us must take is a test. And the question the test asks us to answer is “Can you trust yourself as you are.” Can you trust the life you have been given and the resources you have been given to make life work for you and for others? Can you trust your ability to prevail over all that misleads and discourages and sometimes defeats us? We can’t get out of going into the wilderness. We have to get into it, and hope that we are led by gentle pushes and taps along the way.

Before closing I want to add that this wilderness journey also happens to congregations as it does to individuals. This congregation in particular has lost a settled minister of whom it was very deeply fond. Despite the tremendous strength and energy that is here, there is also evidence that some things are not working as well as they used to or as they should.

You have entered a wilderness where you will test your capacity to care and to commit, to preconceive the mission of this congregation and a vision of where you will be in five years. I am sure there will be some who would rather stay home than take this journey, but I assure you that as a wilderness journey is essential for every individual, and it is essential for every congregation. You can’t get out of it, so I hope you will be able to get into it.