

Wilderness: Waste-land or Womb-land?
December 5, 2020
North Oak Christian Church

Grace to you from God our Creator and Sustainer and greetings from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A wilderness can be a frightening place. One definition defines wilderness as “Something characterized by bewildering vastness, perilousness, or unchecked profusion.” That sounds quite a bit like the last months, almost year in this nation and around the world. This has been a difficult time for all of us. We just completed a Thanksgiving like no others in my lifetime where many leaders pleaded for us to not hold festive gathers and not travel. Many Americans heeded that request. Some did not. The number of Covid 19 infections is rising dramatically and the deaths and bodies continue to pile up, sometimes literally. This is a tough time. We have said goodbye to 9 of our North Oak Family this year who have completed their earthly journey. Most of the families listening to me right now have been impacted by Covid 19.

The Bible is full of wilderness stories. The Children of Israel traveling through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the demonic. I have never visited Israel or the Palestinian Territory, but the pictures seem pretty barren. I think I prefer Rocky Mountain National Park myself.

Last week a new church year started. This year the majority of gospel readings are from the Gospel of Mark. Mark was the first written, the shortest, and is titled; “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” I had a seminary professor who gave a one person readers theater reciting the entire gospel for memory. I experienced it several times. There is no birth story, those are in Matthew and Luke. And there are no resurrection stories, only the visit by a few women at the empty tomb. But the whole book is a proclamation of the Good News. During these times you might spend a few hours and read the gospel through.

Mark begins in the wilderness with a quote from Isaiah “...the voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” I can almost hear the rock opera “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” How will this voice in the wilderness be received? How will this gospel be received in our wilderness today? The wilderness can be a waste land of loneliness, fear and even death. OR, as this text announces, the wilderness can be a new beginning, a new thing happening in our midst. It can be a waste-land or a womb-land.

Christianity is unique among the other great religions of the world. Many religions suggest humans can become gods. Spiritual disciplines are designed to train us for deeper spirituality and godlike behavior. Christianity has the audacity to suggest that God becomes a human. Advent is the time in the church years when we prepare for both the first coming of Jesus, as a baby in Bethlehem, and the second coming as Christ the King at the end of time. What makes this “good news” unique and what makes it good news is “Incarnation” – God with us.

Incarnation – God becomes flesh and blood. God becomes human and lives with us. It does not merely suggest Jesus was truly a human. It invites us to consider that being human can be very god-like.

Lately I have been asking friends, like many of you, a question. “What are you doing to stay human?” I heard the phrase on “The Late Show” with Jon Baptiste band “Stay Human.” And I love it. I ask it because for me that is the question I have responded to each day during this past year. What am I doing to stay human? It seems to me that is what turns this wilderness into a womb-land rather than a waste land.

Stay Human → remain connected to others. I know it’s just verbiage, but I argue we need to stay socially connected and physically distanced. Stay connected with those we love. Not hugged a child or grandchild for almost a year, because I love them. For me to stay human it is important to stay connected with those who are different. I don’t want to live exclusively with people who are just like me. I want to be with people who have different life stories, who sing different religious songs, who voted for different candidates. In this community it doesn’t matter who you love, or the color of your skin or the ethnic origin of your family. When we gather to celebrate the Lord’s Meal, we welcome all who are willing to share it with us.

Stay Human → means to be connected with the earth. We were created from the stuff of the earth, the humus, and we will someday return to the earth. Ash Wednesday words marked with ashes on our foreheads are “You are dust and to dust you will return.” Not only the quality of our life is dependent on the health of the earth, our very survival as a species is dependent on our Mother Earth. To stay human is to be one with the human family in celebrating and nourishing our relationship with all of creation, especially those most vulnerable.

Stay Human → means to stay connected with God because God became one with us. To stay human is to embrace the creator’s world and the creator’s intention to fill it with compassion. In baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with Christ. Each day we live as “the body of Christ” in our homes and our communities and in our world.

To stay human is to change a paradigm. Too often in the past when I make a mistake I say, “well I am only human.” Incarnation invites us to celebrate our humanness and when we get caught doing the work of God in Christ we can affirm “after all I am human.” When you are celebrated for your compassion, your work for justice, your acts of love and people take note and thank you. In our mind we can quietly tell ourselves “Thanks for noticing – I am a human being.”

Advent is our time to live in this wilderness and make of it a womb-land, not a waste-land. We do that by STAYING HUMAN.

Ideas other have shared with me.

I am staying human by sending letters and cards through snail mail and email to people I care about and are alone.

I am staying human by practicing extreme selfcare.

I am staying human by reducing my carbon footprint.

I am staying human by sitting in silence for 30 minutes every day.

I am staying human by attending a men's Bible study each week.

...sending reminders to people who are grieving that grief is a healing process and we are all united in this life and the next.

...attending a woman's Bible study and making a contribution to Cherith Brooks.

...calling people who live alone and reminding them they are not alone.

...stopping to break up an angry confrontation at a bus stop hoping it would not result in violence.

...writing short statements of encouragement to share on Facebook.

...making a poster every day since last February and posting it in my window.

...putting up lights in a home where no guests will be entertained, but residence will celebrate Advent and Christmas.

The list goes on and on. What are you doing to stay human? We get to decide for ourselves and others - this wilderness will be a waste-land or a womb-land. God's decision has already been made. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to each and all of us."

FSHP - Amen