

Exodus 3: 1-8

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Mark 1:1-11

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" ', John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

“Living in the Wild”

Rev. Rebecca McFee

January 8, 2012

I hope it isn't too absurd to start a sermon by saying that I hope life never asks me to amputate my own arm. This wasn't the pleasure of one of our own natives. You may know him as Aaron Ralston. He is the mountaineer who became famous through an incident that happened in his life that is detailed in his book called *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, and in a movie that maybe some of you saw, entitled *127 Hours*. Ralston is a graduate of Cherry Creek School District, and also of Carnegie-Mellon. He is a mechanical engineer for Intel, and it was while he was in Utah at Robbers' Roost that he fell into a crevasse and a boulder dislodged and made him unable to escape. I can only imagine, and there are only a few people in the world who would know how to amputate

one's own arm. I can only imagine the inner resolve it would take to actually do that and keep yourself conscious, and allow yourself to still be able to walk out and find yourself back to freedom. It is an amazing story.

If you watch the movie or read the book, it's not necessarily a particularly religious story. It is a story of survival, thought. Of life at its worst and harshest. But it strikes me that it is also at the core of a very strong metaphor and motif that runs through our whole Scripture. If we go back to Advent, we have a lot of stories of the prophets, about the wilderness. How harsh the desert is, and yet these words to these oppressed people, it says, "God's going to come. God's going to liberate you." And then when Jesus as a baby is born, this baby Jesus is names Emmanuel. God is with us. God will come and save us. That's a good story. The problem is, in Ralston's case, the helicopters didn't come. He waited. He waited the first day. He waited until the fifth day before he realized that he was going to have to do something on his own. The problem is, we would so much love for God to always intervene. The problem is, it doesn't always work with helicopters or with rescue. It just doesn't always work. And here I am, I'm a minister. If I didn't believe that God didn't save us, I wouldn't be here. And yet it's trickier than that. I'm not fatalistic. I wouldn't just say, "Well, you know what? Sometimes God saves you and sometimes God doesn't." It's not really a very good message. In fact, there's a lot that we can learn, though, that is a very beautiful message of hope in those moments where maybe our situation has even seemed worse than just cutting off a limb.

It is from the Scripture writers that we get a very strong glimpse of what it means to live in the desert. Our whole Scripture, from beginning to end, takes place in a desert, and here is the general idea of the writers. The desert is unforgiving, it is not only dry and barren, it is void. It is a place where things do not thrive. It is a place cut off from life itself. It can be a scary place, or it can be a place full of chaos. Sometimes it is a place of wandering or restlessness, but it's not a place of peace or stability. That's one side of it. On the other side, the Scripture also contains a very strong view that the wilderness is beautiful, sacred, and an honored place where we do find God. The irony, we always try to avoid it, and on the other hand, it's where we often find intimacy with God. In fact, it is the prophet Hosea who says these beautiful words. "God says, I will allure you and bring you to a lonely wilderness, and there in your heart I will speak tenderly. In the barren soil of your loneliness, I will speak my love. I will betroth you to me forever as my spouse. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and then you will know me, your Lord, and you will call me a spouse."

A minister, Noel Bordador, says "It is in the wilderness of life that an intimacy springs forth, not in the factual knowledge of God, but intimacy that comes in trusting in the midst of the wilderness." It is for these reasons that in Scripture some of the mightiest and the most powerful events take place in wilderness places. For our Muslim friends, it is this powerful story that we also have, of Hagar and Ishmail who have been sent forth to be on their own, and they are placed in the midst of a wilderness that is about to kill them, when a spring of life comes forward, and God is able to nurture them and send them in a new direction. And then we have this wonderful passage of Moses, where God

calls him from this burning bush in the midst of what looks like not only a barren place, but a barren place for the people of Israel, the Hebrews.

But then we come to this passage today. It is the baptism of Jesus, that if you are in a church that goes by the lectionary, is always preached in January, that barren month, and here we hear this passage this time of year, preached that starts in the wilderness. Yes, it starts with John the Baptist, that I have to say is not who you would wish for your daughter to bring home as a fiance'. He's a strange one. He's been eating a little too many locusts, been living in the woods a little bit too long for his own good, I admit that. But here he comes, and here he brings water to those of us who are dry, to the times in which life has been a little bit too much to take, here comes the water, this parallel that runs all the way from Hagar and Ishmael all the way to the beauty of Jesus' own baptism, comes this reminder that God's presence always brings us to a new place to drink. The Scripture also suggests that we are people quick to want to escape. Why not? I don't like to be in wilderness very long. I don't even camp very long, many days, before I just want to be home, much less the situations of life that are harsh. Who wants to be there?

And yet there is a suggestion in our Scripture that again the intimacy of God often comes, the call of God in our lives often come, just like Jesus' call of ministry in this passage comes. Sometimes in the worst, in the harshest of conditions. It is the case that ancient Christianity took up these motifs and developed them, especially in two different strands. One of the early desert fathers in the other Celtic Christianity. If you're from the Catholic tradition, you might know the seven deadly sins better and can quote them quicker than I can, but they are anger, greed, laziness, pride, lust, envy and gluttony. I had to just read them. They've been popularized in books, in B movies, not doing very much justice to the tradition. But in its original form, the desert fathers believed that living in the simplicity of very little was the avenue to find God. And it was when we lived in the desert that, if we clung too closely to any of these seven, we not only lost our possibility to be close to God, but we lost the possibility of even surviving in the desert. It literally was a survival technique for those people of the early desert fathers.

Then we take you to Celtic Christianity, that is a wilderness of a different sort. If you've ever been there, some of their holy sights or holy island that's in North Umbria in Northern England on the North Sea, and then Iona, that's in Scotland, on the other side of the coast. These places are cold and windy and dark, and in the winter months you rarely get more than five hours of daylight where you would not see each other, you would not gather much. But they had a very strong sense that there was a holy place, and a thin place, where when you are in that place and darkness, you are also very close to the beauty and the profundity of God. These are sacred places, because this is where you find your solitude. The wilderness. It is a place of exile from the predictable kind of God where we are forced to give up the predictableness of God. The wilderness forces us to let go of our control and in the dark night of faith, we let God take us on a journey to the promised land that leads us through the desert. The experience of the wilderness leads us, and it may not be how we want it.

Our wilderness looks different today. It may look differently because it may not be about hot or cold, or windy or dry. It may be the feeling that we're surrounded by people and yet we're very alone. It may be that we have had a deep relationship, and now we are on our own. It may be the physical loss of a job, but all of those comments, spiritual and mental, that ask the question, "Who am I now?" Sometimes the questions come in "How did I get here?" "How did I fall into this rabbit hole?" and "How am I going to get out of this rabbit hole?" Maybe though, we the people of faith consider that the rabbit hole holds for us profound points of entry with God.

I think of the artist who can draw a simple-looking picture of barren trees in the winter, and I always look at those portraits and wonder, "How did they do that?" I could only make stick figures of black and white, and yet when I look at that portrait I see all the texture and all the colors that dance in the midst of those barren trees, and I wonder if that's what wilderness really is for us spiritually, a good place where the hues of color dance.

Well, at this point, I should have inserted a joke, and I don't have it for you. I feel bad, because it is about a book that I read, that is not happy, and I feel like I have to preface it with something, and I don't have it, so next time I'm going to bring you a joke. I promise that. We have a wonderful time at the women's book group in this congregation, and this summer we did the list of what we were going to read for this year, and I put a book on the list myself that had great reviews and sounded pretty good, but I wasn't sure if I could actually read it, which is a problem if you're leading a book group. The name of the book is *Room* by Emma Donahue, so this summer I literally decided I would just get by, read it, get it over with. Because it is about the abduction of a 19-year-old, and it is about her living in the room in a back shed of the person who's abducted her. You enter the story of her life probably six or seven years later, and there she is in the tragedy of the story has brought her a five-year-old son. It seems like it's a painful book to read and yet I couldn't put it down, and finished it in three days. But the beauty of the book is that this child has saved her life. In the midst of the wilderness that was so painful, here she has blossomed into a mother who will give this child everything, will teach it everything she can remember, as she recites nursery rhymes and stories and tells the child about God and a new place that one day he will live in. And there is such hope and beauty when you read about how she will make it, and how she believe, finally, after these many years, how she has faith again that life will truly happen. It is a beautiful story, so go read it. I won't tell you anything more. But she says in the story in many different ways, salvation has come to me in this boy, a beautiful boy.

Well, I return to what I started with, Aaron Ralston. He lives in our area. He's now married, he has a son. He had a goal that he wanted to fulfill, which was to climb all of Colorado's 14ers solo and in the wintertime, a feat that had never been done, and he has now achieved that goal. He also says that he always leaves a note of where he can be found. Well, it is true, we are the community of faith, and the invitation is also for us to leave notes, so that people know when we are in the wilderness, so that we can be the companions of one another when the wilderness comes. But our scripture also teaches us that we are never alone, for we are given the privilege of baptism, of water that always

comes and nurses us, of springs of water that comes when we don't expect it. The salvation of God. It may not be a helicopter, but God is always with us. Emmanuel. God present to us, in the wilderness. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.