

“Taking a Walk on the Wild Side”

March 17th 2013, 5th Sunday of Lent

Scriptures: Isaiah 43:16-21 and Philippians 3:4b-14

Since I have been thinking about this sermon I have found the images that Isaiah conjures up in this little passage we just read startling. Israel as well as the rest of humanity seeks something very common really, security, being settled, and knowing that our buildings, our economic systems, our societal structures, and even our theologies all bend in that direction, Isaiah’s words here cut against the grain.

Isaiah knew his congregation. His word from the Lord spoke into the chaos and confusion of a people who had suffered not only a disruption of life, but also a disrupted understanding of God. Their cherished expectations of what it meant to be the covenant people had crumbled along with the destruction of Jerusalem. God had allowed this destruction of their naïve theology and now they were exiled from both the land and the notion that God would protect them. These befuddled desperate people assembled to hear Isaiah’s sermon.

The old prophet doesn’t pull any punches. Yes, he said, they were being judged for their sins and the judgment was severe. But that was not God’s ultimate purpose in sending the Babylonians to drag the Hebrews away. The real purpose was to call them to a deeper understanding of the covenant.

Here is where the wild side of the wilderness comes into focus for Isaiah. The people of Israel like people today have found their lives disrupted and their understandings of God's place in the world torn in two. Instead of encouraging them with a passive view of God as the doting grandparent, "Awe, here, here, everything will be ok, not to worry, just be good little boys and girls and the candy is surely going to be on its way" , Isaiah seems to point to the very edge of life they have come to and say, "Yes it's wild out here, it's unsettling, but in the wilderness there is salvation to be found, grace is abundant as the rain of a desert storm brings water flowing to the thirst of the jackals and ostriches.

Sometimes being in a storm can be wonderfully awakening. It's a risky existence this life we are living, as we are called to love even after we have been burned trying, we are called to show compassion in the midst of a world that bears its teeth at differences and weaknesses, and we are called to trust in God and have real faith even if it seems that the immediate results lead us further into the wilderness. We don't know why often, but God calls us toward vulnerability at times rather than away from it. Sometimes the interruption brings crisis. You find you are growing older, surrounded by illness, seeing loved ones come and go, and you begin to ask what does it all mean, what does God want of us anyway?

Usually the interruption is subtle. .You see a kid playing in the backyard. His imagination and enthusiasm clearly has him on the edge of delight. You begin to cry and you don't know why. Or on the way to church you

see a huddled old woman pushing a cart full of empty cans. Through all the hymns and sermon you can't get her out of your mind. Or you glance in a mirror, see your parent looking back at you, and wonder how that happened.

It's not these events that surprise us. It's the pull on the heart, it's that uncertainty in the presence of the certain One. We are always being driven out of our comfort zones no matter how we try to insulate ourselves. We seek the good old days of our selective memories, but God never lets us spend much time in the past.

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." We are people called to the future by God, and that's leading to something that takes us on a wilder unsettled path. We would like it to be different, and much of our religious life is an ill-fated attempt at taming this relationship. But, God's pattern is clear in our Lenten walk with Christ, a walk that must encounter the cross before any revelation of glory is possible.

You can't walk on the wild side and remain unchanged, the wilderness will always leave a mark on you. You can't spend that kind of intense time with God and not come out a new creation. God will take us through hell and back, just to reveal his love for us. That's the way the covenant works. Along the way, though, it's easy to lose our bearings, we will at times be tempted by vistas that are like the mirage you see in

the dessert horizon. God guides us through those times by sending, prophets, teachers, and guides. Christ came literally to show that God will not let us alone to wonder in the wild side.

I have seen Christ lead me there in such a way. Through Charlie Spears who took the time to lead a class that was sometimes just me and him at Tulsa University to explore how C.S. Lewis saw Christ as he encountered the wild side. His stories helped us be bold enough to share our own strange tales together. While on deployment I can't ever forget the story of a Catholic chaplain telling the marines of his encounter with Mother Theresa in the Philippines. She could have mere picked any church there and thousands would have gather to honor her instantly. But she took some priests , chaplains and other dignitaries to the heart of the entertainment district walked into the club and ministered to the young girls supporting their families living in a sad part of the wild side. She took one of the young women's hands and said to her honored guests herein lies the kingdom of God what are we doing to receiver her as such. Nothing could be more unsettling to some, but nothing could be more profoundly true. People are in the wilderness because it is the place where souls are reshaped, and they cannot come out until they are new creatures refined again and again, until offered up at the end of their journey to be eternally set upon a course where God's presence provides all that was absent and hoped for along the way.

So the point of walking with God is not this arrival, but the walk itself. As we walk along, we discover that God provides living water even as

we are struggling to forge ahead on the wild side of this life we are given to live.

If walking on the wild side is an enduring , yet unsettling, image of the where we must go to find out our future, the stream along the way is the symbolizes God's grace that saves our us as we discover that wilderness is much more than a backdrop, it defines our very thirst for life itself as well. It is a stream that we yearn for just as a deer thirsts for running water. It is a stream that others come to as well. We can't fully partake of its refreshment until we see it's for them as well as us. Taking a walk on the wild side then is what the church is all about. Thus, knowing this, we can affirm with Paul, "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let's Join Paul and lets join Jesus, lets join a world of wonders such as ourselves, let's take that walk on the wild side.