

I've been thinking a lot lately about the wilderness. I take my dog, Benji, out for walks a few times during the day and we go back into the woods and just walk. We don't have a goal. There is no destination. There isn't anyone to meet. There's no phone, at least not when I walk. There's just me, Benji, and sometimes Gwen, which makes the walk even more special. I walk because Benji loves to be out running around, and actually, so do I. I especially love walking in "the wilderness", or at least as close to the wilderness and I can get while still be in town. In my last place where we lived, I walked to the edge of town where there was a beautiful meadow and I watched many sunsets there. At the place before that, Benji and I walked the SooLine Trail which was wonderful. If you were to come to my house and walk down the stairs from the upstairs, you will walk under a picture Gwen gave to me of a path through the woods – My SooLine Trail inside. She knows I love the wilderness, and now I have a bit of it in the house.

In the church seems different from this. We seem to have made the wilderness a place we want to get through so we can get to our real destination. We think about the wilderness in the Exodus Story. Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness, a desert. There's all sorts of issues that come up. Food is in short supply. There's no water. People even say that they had it better when they were slaves in Egypt. We know that there was a lot of death on the wilderness excursion. None of the people that left Egypt entered the promised land: they all died. The offspring of the people entered the promised land. As a result of this wilderness experience, we are led to believe that the wilderness is something that is bad, at least when we look at it biblically. This thinking could have sunk deeply into our minds already.

If that isn't enough. There's also the story about Jesus being driven out into the wilderness. That wasn't one of the best stories either, was it? Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and doesn't eat or drink for 40 days. And then the devil shows up. Jesus, we are told, is famished. I would be too if I didn't eat for 40 minutes—for Jesus, he hasn't eaten for 40 days. And then the devil shows up and he tempts Jesus. He even quotes scripture to try to coax Jesus into following him. It's not a fun scene to watch. This wilderness experience is another one of those experiences we just don't ever want to see.

These are the two big wilderness experiences of the Bible, and neither of them are real positive experiences. As a result of this, often times people claim that they are having a wilderness experience when things are going bad for them. Going through a divorce or losing a loved one or a job, unable to fix a problem that is really bad, financial difficulties, are all experiences that we sometimes feel as if we are having a wilderness experience.

We are going through one of those times now, aren't we? Covid. It's a wilderness experience. Just like the Moses story, we want to go back to the way things used to be. We don't like the journey we are on: we can't be with the people we want to be with sometimes. We have to wear masks that we don't always like. So many things get canceled that we really wish we could attend. You just want to

scream sometimes. And we cry up to God, blaming God even sometimes for this disease, that this isn't how we are to live.

Let's look a little closer at the wilderness experiences. In the Exodus story, God had a plan and God was there. He led the people by a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night—this was God's presence throughout the journey. God heard the cries of the people. The people complained about not having food or water and God provided for them. God gave them their daily bread.

When Jesus was driven into the wilderness, he wasn't alone either, was he? In Luke 4, it is written, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." God was there in the wilderness: Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. Angels came to him. God was there and God gave Jesus his daily bread.

In our wilderness experience with Covid and whatever else our wilderness looks like, what happens when we take the frame away that says what a horrible experience we are having, and change it to, asking what it means that God is with us and God has a plan. I am not saying that God made Covid to punish us, but that God has a plan. What is that plan? In what ways are we to make changes? What is God providing after hearing our cries? And are we thanking God for that?

Yes, we are in the wilderness. We are not alone. God is with us and He hears our cries. God is providing our daily bread. God is filling us, too, with his Holy Spirit. We have been given the power through this Spirit to see that God is leading us to a new place. May we live our lives according to Isaiah 43:19, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? God is here. God is doing something. God is leading us. Let us take off our blinders and see that God and what He is doing is good. Amen