

Lent 1: 2020.03.01

SYMBOL: Cairns

TWO MAIN TEXTS FOR SUNDAY:

Deuteronomy 8, selected

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep the commandments. God humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years...For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing...Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God...When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God...who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. God made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God...

Mark 1: 12-13

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

SERMON:

Have any of you ever relied on cairns when hiking in a remote place?

Holy week in the AZ desert - hiking in a wilderness with no maps, no trails...use of cairns to mark my way. Danger of getting disoriented...real, dangerous...

We rarely are physically in that danger in our society, but more than ever I experience a spiritual sense of being lost in our land. Where do we turn when we're anxious, struggling, emotionally or spiritually disoriented - wandering in the wilderness of life?

Where do we find God?

We get lost so easily. We forget, we forget what to look for, often times when we're lost we start scrambling, looking for something to grasp onto -

All kinds of cairns in our society...when you Google cairns and wilderness, you'll see lots of articles imploring people to STOP building cairns. They not only disrupt sometimes fragile ecosystems, but they can confuse those on trails, leading them astray. Cairns have a purpose - they're not meant to be artwork in the woods.

Our society is full of false cairns to help us out of our wilderness experiences - black hole resorts, costing around \$2000/night, will take all of your digital devices so that you can experience relationships anew... or join the millions who turn to astrology to help them find their way in the universe. These false cairns feed into our desire to fix a hungry soul, and usually leave us more spiritually deprived than

ever . Our society doesn't offer us much that truly shows us the way to God; how to find our way through the wilderness.

So where do we look for God's signposts? God's cairns?

Scripture is a place to start.

Scripture has a lot to say about wilderness time. In the Old Testament, the word for wilderness is used more than 400 times.

The Book of Numbers, one of the first 5 books of the Hebrew scriptures, is all about Israel's wanderings in the desert. We call it the book of Numbers, but in Hebrew it's known as *BaMidbar* or "in the wilderness". For it's in the wilderness that God speaks to God's people. It's in the wilderness that the people learn what it is to belong to God.

Being in the wilderness is an opportunity, an opportunity to listen, to be fed manna and have flint rock pour forth life giving water just when we're at our wits end, hungry and thirsty. Being in the wilderness is serious business.

But I believe that God desires, yes *desires* that we spend time in the wilderness. Our passage from Deuteronomy began: "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness,"
Remember. Remember it's God that leads.

And from our reading in Mark - there Jesus was driven into the wilderness - *driven*, cast out with a force which he could not resist.

What helps us, as individuals and as a community, remember?

We, the congregation of University Mennonite, are in a time, in some ways, of being in the wilderness. Last Sunday during our congregational meeting we affirmed the leadership team's recommendation to let our campus ministry, Third Way Collective, end and spend time in deeper discernment about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus in this time and place. For a congregation that has been built on the identity of our relationship with the University, this is a big decision.

The line from our leadership team: "Spending time in deeper discernment about our roles as followers of Jesus here in this community"... that sounds like wilderness talk to me.

In our own lives, we may be led into the wilderness, we may go into the wilderness to be nourished, as Jesus often did in the darkness of the morning **and** we may be cast out into the wilderness, into wild, scary places.

What are the cairns, the markers, that we, as a people, might look for as we find ourselves in this new place?

As I wrestled with this sermon this week, I kept searching for what are THE SIGNPOSTS that will show us the way, as we seek to be followers of Jesus in this time and place. I had this false belief that I needed to figure it out and then bring it to you. Forgive me, brothers and sisters. Forgive me. Once I realized this wasn't about me figuring it out, but inviting us, US, to look for and name the cairns, the signposts together, I thought 'this is doable'. This is what being a body of believers is all about. We can show each other the signs, the cairns God offers us.

Transitions in life - welcomed or unwelcomed, can be disorienting. When I worked as an oncology chaplain, our team of nurses, social workers and chaplains had a special appointment with individuals who had finished treatment. These folks were no longer considered active patients, but were now referred to as 'survivors'. We met with these survivors and celebrated together, for they had made it through the wilderness of treatment. AND we named the ways that transition to survivorship, to this new life, could be challenging and fraught with dangers. Many who are in this place of transition from a calendar full of doctors appointments and treatments, to a life that has such a defined goal and purpose, where they regularly meet with a team who knows them, suddenly that's all done. Depression is commonly experienced by survivors. In those special survivorship appointments we had, Chaplains were the last to meet with the person. We'd bring in a basket of stones etched with inspirational words and invite them to look at one and choose that named some part of this journey for them, and offer them a blessing for the next stage of their journey. Faith, hope, courage...they were some of the most commonly chosen stones, but I think that

the stone that people claimed as their own most often said 'remember'. They wanted to remember - remember the love, the courage, the community, the faith that surrounded them. They wanted to remember these things as they moved into this new chapter in their lives. And so they chose a stone, a marker, to help them remember.

So as we begin this Lenten journey through the wilderness, I offer two signposts, two cairns to get us started. My hope is you - each of you - will offer your own cairn, something that marks the way for you when you feel lost, in the barren, disorienting wilderness, a guidepost that helps you orient yourself to God, what steadies you on this journey of life?

My cairns this morning -

Last week, to start our congregational meeting, I bought a piece of writing, a prayer, by Teilhard de Chardin, a French Catholic priest. It's on the bright yellow cards at the ends of your pew.¹ Take a minute to find one. I want to focus on just the first line. "Above all, trust in the slow work of God." That has been a guiding prayer for me. 'Trust in the slow work of God'. Oh, what a gift! That reminder allows me to rest in God's timing, to stop trying so hard, stop acting like I have to figure it all out, and to trust in God's timing; to simply trust in God.

That's one cairn - one signpost that points to God in the wilderness. (Place "trust" stone on top of cairn.)

¹ <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/prayer-of-theilhard-de-chardin/>

The other is what I say to those who come up for grapes during communion. So far, it's been our children. Does anyone know what it is? Well this morning I offer it to us all. "You are known and loved by God". I don't think we can hear that reminder often enough. We forget it so easily. You - you _____ (*say name of someone in pews*), You are known and loved by God. (*Repeat a few times*).

REMEMBER, remember that, write it on the walls of your heart.

That's my other cairn. Each of you, each of us, no matter what we carry in here with us today. We, you, I, am known and loved by God. That's a cairn, a pile of rocks, that guides my way through wilderness moments. I offer it as a guidepost for you as well.

This lenten journey, I ask you to consider coming forward at some point. you might come up during sharing time and pile a few rocks together and name aloud your signpost, your cairn. Maybe at the end of the service, maybe when no one else is here in the sanctuary, you simply quietly build your cairn, offering it as a prayer for us all.

These markers are reminders that we are not alone, that we are known AND loved by God. These markers remind us that above all, we are to trust in the slow work of God.

What are the signposts that help you navigate the wilderness? Let's share them with one another, help guide one another through the challenging, desert-like moments of our lives.

END SERMON HERE -

Name transition to reflective time.

The wilderness can be scary, it can be disorienting - it's a place that Jesus was driven into, AND it's a place that he snuck away to in the early morning darkness. I think that's a sermon for another time. It can be a beauty-filled, solitary place, a place that nourishes our soul. As we transition out of this time of words, so many words, I invite you to be nourished by listening to the sounds of wildness. We're going to hear a recording by acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton, who captures sound in wild places. As Ruth said, when planning this part of the service, we'll be sitting *in wilderness together*. This wilderness offers not a dead silence, or a cold silence, but a vibrant silence, a place where for some, it's easier to be aware of the presence of God.² We'll walk with Gordon Hempton into the woods and hear the sounds of the wild. Sit back and listen deeply - may it nourish you as it has nourished me.

² [Thomas Merton: One Foot in the Wilderness, One Foot in the World](#)