August 12th– 9:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

A Journey Into The Wilderness

1. Elijah’s Bad Day

It would be very fair to say that Elijah is having a very bad day. And that’s more of an understatement. He has run into the wilderness, because Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife, is screaming mad and furious and wants to take Elijah’s life. Elijah is exhausted, frustrated, and he feels like he’s a failure of a prophet. He’s dismissed his servant, he sits beneath a broom tree with not much shade and looks up to the Heavens, and more or less says, “Enough. E-nough. Take away my life.” Elijah is DONE. He’s lost hope, his self-esteem has gone down the shoot, and he’s dismissed his servant – pretty much saying that he wants nothing to do with people.

It’s almost a merciful cry, ‘If you love me God, you’ll just let me be done, you’ll just end this – that’s the kind thing to do. I’m done’ And God in God’s mercy knows that Elijah might be done, but God is not done with Elijah. God provides him an angel, who feeds him cake and a jar of water and basically tells him that he needs a time out. A forty day and forty night time out walking around Mount Horeb, getting some Sabbath time, and getting a new perspective on life. He needs to recognize who he is and whose he is, and he is going to need some time away to sort that out.

II. The Depression

The Scriptures often refer to these wilderness experiences. For the Israelites, the wilderness was the exodus. In the New Testament, we hear about Jesus who sought refuge in the wilderness. And so, it would make sense, that since we are human, as the prophets and all before us were, we would also have these wilderness hours, or days, or months, or maybe even years. For me, the wilderness is a tough, but redeeming, space. Sometimes, you need the wilderness, to grow, to change, because the wilderness forces you into a space where you need to readjust priorities, reconsider life, and renew a sense of who you are. It’s not easy – but if it was, would it be worth it?

We need to call Elijah’s wilderness experience out for what it is – for Elijah would be a good candidate for depression. He’s lost hope, he’s lost a sense of self, he’s isolated himself from everyone he knows and loves. He’s having, what psychologists might name ‘suicidal ideation’ coming from a deep sense that he wants the pain of his life and situation over and he is exhausted. As it was then, and as it is now, it look like an appealing permanent solution to what can and will be a temporary problem. The redeeming part of the story is that Elijah, one of the most beloved prophets we know, struggles, deeply – and even in that struggle, even when Elijah says that he’s had enough, God says that he isn’t done with him.

III. Somewhere in the Wilderness

Have you ever been in the wilderness? The wilderness experience can be small or large – maybe it’s a loss of a job, perhaps it’s a loss of someone close, maybe it’s a move across the country, or perhaps there’s a wilderness that cuts right down to the roots of you – where you question, who you are, if you’re worthy, and what you’re suppose to do in this world. Wilderness, at one time or another, in the many turns of life, will besiege us at a time and make us readjust, renew, and recollect ourselves.

One of the wilderness months of my life was sitting and filling out PIFs, or Personal Information Forms for churches to look at in the candidacy process. You’re asked to bear your soul a bit on those pages – who are you, what are you called to, where are your strengths, where are your weaknesses? And then you send the PIFs out into the world, into the matchmaking system of the PCUSA and you pray. And you pray some more. And you sit in bed and watch too many episodes of Gilmore Girls, and you twiddle your thumbs, and you wait for a call, and you wonder if you’ll be one of the lucky ones to get a job in a world where churches are in decline rather than growth.

For me, it was a five month journey of candidacy. I didn’t walk around Mount Horeb, but I walked around the block, and up and down the boardwalk, and tried to gain perspective. I wasn’t on the brink of suicide like Elijah, thank God, but I was wondering, ‘What are you up to God? I feel called to be a minister, but what does this mean? Help me.’ And then the e-mail came in from SPC, and then a phone call, and then a visit, and the rest is history. The wilderness passed, but I wouldn’t trade in those five months. I could have watched a little less Netflix, but those months helped me to regain footing, to reclimatize to America, to figure out a bit more about who I was and what I was called to do in the world at this time. It was a slog, but it was worthwhile – I look back on those five months as tough, but transformational.

And yet, I had people and a support system to get me through – the real cheerleaders of life that say, ‘you might be tired, but keep walking.’ Just like the angel that appeared to Elijah, there’s been times where I’ve been passed a cuppa tea and a biscuit and been told, ‘It’s been a tough day – it will get better. And we all need those people – and I believe you’ll find a round of cheerleaders in here in this morning’s worship – people who will encourage you, sustain you, and remind you of God’s love in and through their words and actions.

There’s this short story or metaphor that I usually come back to during these wilderness moments. It will remind you of a Biblical parable, but with a modern twist, "This guy is walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, "Hey you, can you help me out?". The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, "Father, I'm down in this hole, can you help me up?". The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey Joe, it's me - can you help me out?", and the friend jumps in the hole. The guy says, "Are you stupid, now we're both down here!". The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."

More than the doctor, more than the priest, we need more people like Joe who have been in the wilderness and know the way out and can show us a new way. That’s where things change – that’s where the old becomes the new and transformation happens.

IV. Where is Your Wilderness?

So again, I ask, where have you seen the wilderness in your own life? Those times that you might not wish on anyone else, but times where you have learned and grown and been transformed? Whether a quarter-life crisis or mid-life crisis, or whatever you’d like to call it – where were moments you stopped the car and said, ‘Something’s gotta give. Now.’ You’re done, something has to change.

I’m not asking you to reflect on the wilderness to bum you out – but rather, to reconceptualise what that time was to you. Maybe you look back on a time and shake your head and initially say, ‘Nothing good came from that?’ And maybe, maybe that’s true. But what if there were things you’ve learned, things that God showed you in that time and place, that couldn’t have been taught otherwise?

Wherever you are in this life, whatever path your on – whether you are in the midst of the wilderness or walking on a path of lovely solitude, the chief thing I would remind you is that God is with us in all of it – in that wilderness or in that solitude. One of the names we have for Jesus is Emmanuel, which translates to, ‘God-with-us.’ It isn’t ‘God with us when we’re in a great place’ – It’s ‘God-with-us’ ...Always, forever, no matter where we are or what we are doing, God is with us. And even though Elijah thought that he was done, we are reminded that Emmanuel, is not done with us – but will transform us, redeem us, and encourage us in every season of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.