

The Wilderness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 February, 2021

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Lent 1B

Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Today is the first Sunday of lent. a season that is a time of preparation, a time of journey, a time of making ready to experience resurrection. It's all in some way symbolic and yet it's deeper than symbol. Its real life and we draw on stories that will help us in our faith to make that journey.

We start off with a flood - or the end of a flood, the end of a wilderness time that's rather wet. If a wilderness time can be described as a time when things are different, changed, you're in unfamiliar territory, you have to check every little thing you're doing - because it's not what it was.

Noah, and the story of the people finding new life in God, with some signs that gave them promise for the future - the rainbow - was in a wilderness time. However we might understand that story, it is told as a story of a new creation, a new beginning, a new starting where the old has gone and the new has come. It's been, if you like, washed away almost like a giant baptism.

It's all symbolic. It's all story to help us understand journey - and life - and relationship. We need not get too caught up on numbers of animals, or sizes of arks, or any of those things. The story is a story of 'the old has gone, the new has come', there's been a big washing - and everything's now clean and fresh and you've got a new beginning.

If we want to take that story just a little further, it's also a time of grief - because when the old is gone a lot has changed; and we deal with grief whenever we deal with change. We're in a time of change now, on any number of levels you can imagine, and we might start to think about some of those later.

So there's a new beginning after a time of a wilderness journey in the unfamiliar, maybe slightly chaotic and seemingly chaotic, uncontrollable moments that wilderness tends to promise or bring. So it was nice to know that there was some sense of future that had some order to it.

One definition of God, the creator and source of all life, is the power that brings order out of chaos. Throughout the universe there is chaos in many, many things. And order comes and gives that meaning and purpose. So all of the chaotic different worlds that are around all the universe, all work together to make it possible for us actually to be on this earth and breathe the air we do. We are indeed made of stardust - and I'm not being metaphorical now.

There is a chaos that brings us order. So there's been chaos in Noah's story, in the life of the people and in the life of the world now brought to some order after the washing and cleansing and a new beginning.

That's the end of one wilderness story and the beginning of a new journey. We have another wilderness story that has less, it would seem, to do with water - although water is going to be the theme. You might have noticed some water features as you walked in. Water is going to be the theme throughout lent - and people can draw on that water. Please don't drink that water. Don't draw on that water, but draw on the image of that water throughout lent.

The wilderness journey for Jesus is one that takes 40 days and nights. I remember saying in this place about 12 months ago something about the number 40. It's a time of transformation when something starts and - at the end of that 40 - there will have been a time of transformation. A time of change. A time of reformation, a time of a new beginning, a new creation if you like. Think of all the 'forty' stories that you know.

It's a time of transformation and change - and Jesus enters into that time at the beginning of the wilderness story. When we think of wilderness maybe we don't think of a flood - I usually don't, but people who've lived through floods know it was a wilderness story. A time of chaos, losing the old, things being washed away and trying to make sense of each moment in each day and what you've got and what you haven't got. The same could be said for fires. Fires are another wilderness story.

And then there's the wilderness itself, that area that other places might call forest or outback or natural places. The wilderness where we walk into there and we don't always know how to navigate it. We don't always know how to tend to it or to allow it to tend to us.

Gareth and I went on a nature walk over in Western Australia a few years ago with a wonderful indigenous woman who just took us around. And she just took us into the land they had there. It didn't seem particularly special. It wasn't particularly tended as such. You know there were no particular gardens there. It wasn't a manufactured place. It was the land they had. It was her homeland. It was her land. Her people were from there.

And she took us on a journey through there and introduced us to that land in ways we never would have discovered without her. From being a place that looked a bit wilderness-like - and I don't know how I'd survive there if I was there. We left some hours later feeling we could actually live there and it would nurture our lives. It was quite an amazing experience.

Maybe she was, in some ways, like some of the angels that tended Jesus. I wonder what form they took? I'm sure they're not Victorian angels in nightgowns with wings. Rather, probably, what is needed for the moment you will have to keep you in this place of chaos and give water to you.

Angels are messengers from God and they come in all forms, even if it is some natural berries off of this tree. Maybe that's an angel too, giving you life - from God, the creator of that life.

Jesus goes on this - on this - look Mark talks about Jesus life in almost no detail whatsoever. We're in verse 9 of the first chapter and he's now off on a wilderness journey, very quickly. And the first eight verses of the chapter, which are only short sentences, are simply introducing us to John - who says *I herald the way of the one who's to come and here he is.*

There he is, he's being baptized and now he's gone on a wilderness journey and it all happens in about 15 sentences! There's no nativity, there's no genealogy, there's no magi, there's no shepherds, there's no angels in Victorian nightwear, there's nothing of that. We just move on. This is the guy, here he is. And the first thing he does, now that he's - (we haven't even been told he's 30, but elsewhere we find out he was 30, the age of becoming a man in society at the time, becoming responsible).

Jesus goes off and the spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. Into a place where things are a little more chaotic, less able to be controlled, and in a place where you have to face things that you otherwise might not face. Mark doesn't tell us what those things are. Just that he was tempted by Satan. Satan's the word given to the one who challenges us to make us better. (That's about as deep a definition as I'm going to get on that.) I'm not talking about another entity, but that thing that helps us, that force, that power, that the spirit of God actually takes us to and says help me make you stronger. Help me help you through this moment and I will challenge you.

So, at the end of Jesus' 40 series of days where there's this transformation taking place, he faces some realities in his life so they don't get in the way later. How many times have you thought: *gee I wish I'd had that 'forty' experience before I started that new job. Or I wish I'd had that 'forty' experience before I started some other new thing.*

Gareth and I have asked that question when we started here for about three months. And then about 12 or 13 months later (that we've absolutely loved) - through a pandemic that we didn't know about, drawing on some very old skills of film (only when I first started cutting film it was with scissors and tape); the journey we've been on. How many times have you looked back over some of your journeys and say, you know: *if I'd known what that was going to be like I wouldn't have gone there.* And yet - what an amazing experience it was. What an amazing change it was. It's good we can't see into the future. It's good we are given challenges and our experiences of transformation and our wilderness times.

Some might think that the last year has been a wilderness time and I can see how that could be understood as one. We went from kind of thinking we knew what our life was all about and how our days worked - to everything working differently. Or not working differently. We went to living in spaces that were familiar to us, but became so familiar. Maybe it was too much, living at home all the time for some.

We became distanced from one another. We call it isolation but we felt distanced from others, so we hardly saw our family in all of that time. When we were in the mountains making film every week, we hardly saw anybody else but we and the local supermarket and then we come back again. And that's how we lived. We all had our ways of living in different ways, in limited ways. It was in many ways a wilderness experience - and we didn't even have to leave home. In fact we had to stay home to have it.

I wonder what we've learned, each one of us, of ourselves in the last 12 months of that wilderness experience. Have you discovered your tolerance for some things that you didn't realize you had. Or maybe you've discovered your intolerance of some things you didn't realize you had. Maybe you've discovered some new skills and insights that you'd never needed to use or think about before.

I think just about everybody I know (and including us) has discovered the importance of family, of friends, of keeping in touch, of commemorating moments, not letting them go by, of making special times special. They don't have to be great extravaganzas but you can mark the moment. Don't lose this moment. This is the moment you have. Make the most of it.

I'm sure there are many things in this last wilderness 12 months that we have all grown through. That's not a G R O A N through, although there's been some of that. It's G R O W N through. I didn't grow in height, I'm shrinking these days. But I certainly think I was instilled with greater things that have made my life more meaningful and more purposeful because of the wilderness experience of the last 12 months.

We've got more ahead. We've got more journeys ahead, but we've already got one under our belt and we do have still the rainbow to remind us that it's not all over and that there's new beginnings every day. And we've had lots of new beginnings every day with rainbows, because it's been raining just about every day for the last month in the mountains.

That's pretty good because we thought we had everything under control. Control is wonderful isn't it? We've planted a garden that likes dry - and it doesn't like the wet, and it's telling us so. It's looking nice and green and then some things are saying they're just going to liquid. Being in control and learning about ourselves are maybe two different things.

There are other wilderness experiences. Some are easily marked like a year of Covid isolation, or whatever it might be. Or another few years where we learn to live pretty much as we're living now while the rest of the world and the whole of the world finds a way of living with a virus that will never leave us. But we need to learn to live with in some way.

I was talking to some friends over the weekend and reflecting on some reading we did on another similar flu 100 years ago, sometimes called the Spanish flu. It didn't come from there, but that's where they started looking after naming it. And it was also through the war times. So when people came back from the war they brought it with them. Just about as many died from the flu, if not more, than died in the war.

We started quarantine times at those times too. Quarantine in Australia has been used for many things and we're starting to do it again. We call it isolation at the moment but quarantine is a little bit further than isolation, but it's at the same concept of isolating one another so we can care for those in need and keep others in a safe place.

So it's part of our history, that we go through times of wilderness experiences, where we move from what is to what is to become - and in the meantime we feel like we're in a little bit of a chaotic space but amazing things happen. Communities pull together, people care for one another and the importance of relationship and family really. And the importance of the land around us that we depend on so much. The awakening of how many things come from overseas when they're not delivered. Have you noticed on the shelves, there's some fewer things? I don't necessarily mean groceries, but if you're looking for larger items and things they are slower getting here now because there's just less traffic.

It makes us more aware of the details and some of the things we might take for granted are now cherished a little more. And that's a good thing. So there's lots of good that can come out of these experiences despite the G R O A N groaning of them.

There's other wilderness experiences that we might individually experience in our lives and they could be layered while other things are happening. I can remember, in employment, being quite comfortable and successful, if that's the word to use - contributing well in a good job, getting along fine, and my personal life being a complete mess! My personal life being a wilderness experience where I just didn't know how to deal with things. Where I was completely lost and in a place of chaos.

So there can be levels of wilderness in our lives. And you might like to think for a moment the levels of wilderness that you've experienced or maybe you carry with you. I know of some people who live in a wilderness experience, understandably, in times of grief when they've lost a loved one and they go into this liminal space where you don't feel in control, things have changed, you don't recognize all the signs - and you're just wondering what's going to happen. It's another 'forty' experience. There's a beginning and there's an end, and you journey through it and you clasp to what you can.

So what was Jesus clasping to in his transformation experience? He had just been baptized and the image we're given is that God said: *listen, this is the one. Listen because great things are going to happen here. This is the one who's going to show you the way to a new way of living.* So Jesus, immediately then, is taken, directed, carried, thrust into the wilderness to deal with those things that might get in the way of all of that good stuff happening.

Now Mark doesn't go into those details, but we could identify them. This is about identifying Jesus as the human being a very, very human being, who, if some of these things get in the way, is going to completely mess up the purpose of him being here. Ego, tiredness particular idiosyncrasies, intolerances, all the sorts of things that we experience too. We might say oh look that's fine but...

I remember being asked at college, at theological college once: *Karen, do you have any intolerances?* And they weren't talking about my lactose intolerance, they were talking about: *is there anything of which you're intolerant in the world?* And I said: *yeah I'm intolerant of intolerance* - which, when you think about it, is a real problem, because I become one of the intolerant myself.

So what are the sorts of things that would get in the way of us making the most of life, of our relationships, of the things that we've discovered are important to us. Would it be old habits dying hard? Not that they're bad they're just not needed now. Would it be not embracing the new because it's too scary? Would it be *oh I've been here before it just feels like I'm going over old ground?* Or would it be *but I'm comfortable I don't want to change?* Or would it be I know I've got a bad temper. Just don't annoy me and I won't express it. Well maybe it's not about the temper. Maybe it's about what annoys to start off with that we need to deal with.

We all carry things that we probably need to give some attention to in our wilderness experiences from time to time. And that's what Jesus did. He needed to go back and not let them get in the way. When it was all over and he had been through whatever he needed to go through to deal with that, he was given what he needed to make the most of his life. He was tended to by God's angels - which could have been everything from *'there was water in the river in the mountain where he was'* - to *'there was actually someone bringing him food'* which they often did to people who lived as hermits in the mountains.

It could have been any number of things, but his needs were tended to and so will ours as we face them. So will ours as we face them.

So you might not think you're in a wilderness experience, and maybe you're not, but then I think: *you've got Josephine Inkipin coming.* I'm not talking about her time being a wilderness experience at all. It's like a whole new beginning. You'll have Gareth and Karen out of your hair. You'll have a year of Covid behind you. You're getting some new skills and new ways of living and relating going and it's full of promise and amazing things are going to happen.

Is there anything we need to just attend to so they can?