**In the Wilderness (sometimes)**

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1st Week in Lent

Rev. Christine E. Burns

*Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up, he was hungry.”*

Something is happening all around us. Even amid chaos, there is the eternal return of spring. We have entered the season of Lent. A time where for forty days (with mini breaks on Sundays to celebrate the resurrection) we get real. We get real about our mortality. We get real that from dust we come to dust we go, and everything is a reminder that we are blowing in the wind; dusty creatures on a planet that is struggling with drought and doubt, climate change and rising oceans. We are not alone, and that very competition for limited resources has made us as humanity less human, less humble, and less kind.

Thank God, it’s not all up to us. And, we have this guy Jesus, who turns the cross upside down. He sends out a mayday that flips the script from Roman occupation to ***God liberation***. **We are in the liberation business here.**

It is International Women’s Day today and women make up half of the global population. And yet, according to the United Nations Human Rights, being born a woman is still the primary cause of exclusion globally. In 18% of countries, women cannot confer citizenship to their spouses or children, 54% of countries lack laws defining rape based on lack of consent, in 51% of countries, women face job restrictions not imposed on men. This holds true for women in the United States regarding job restrictions, and rape remains difficult to prosecute in this country. We need to end violence against women. 1 in 8 women and girls aged 15-49 experienced intimate partner violence in the last year, and 18.7% of women aged 20-24 were married before 18. 12 million girls are married before the age of 18 each year. At this rate, child marriage won’t end until 2092. We need to guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health services. Maternal mortality remains a global crisis. Every 2 minutes, a woman dies from pregnancy or childbirth complications. Access to contraception is unequal and 44% of partnered women across 68 countries still cannot make their own decisions about contraception and reproductive health.

We need to close the gender poverty gap. Women earn 20.5% less than men globally. Women spend 2.5 times more hours daily on unpaid care work than men. Only 36.4% of mothers are covered by maternity benefits. Ending extreme poverty for women and girls will take an additional 137 years. (Source: United Human Rights Commission.)

Now, at this point you may be saying, what’s your point here Christie? Why are we learning about the condition of women in the modern day when our lesson is about a Jewish man called Jesus from two thousand years ago living in Jerusalem? Wasn’t he struggling with loneliness, living in the wilderness and temptation by the devil? Yes! And Jesus, was he not a man born first as an infant child to an unwed, refugee mother who was under the age of 18, had no maternal leave, no home, delivered him in a manger and fled political persecution by foot and donkey in the cover of darkness to Egypt? This text for today from the Gospel according to Luke does not exist in a vacuum. We are all born of a mother. Jewish faith is a matrilineal faith. If your mother is Jewish, you are Jewish. Whether you practice Judaism or not, you remain Jewish unless you convert to another faith. Jesus was Jewish, born of a Jewish mother who was but a child.

Now, in his ministry, he is 33 years old and his mother, was in her late forties or early fifties. We are only in the fourth chapter of the book of Luke as the Gospel writer skips many years of his life hopping from his boyhood in the temple to his baptism immediately before he wanders in the wilderness. The wilderness where Jesus was tempted is known as the Judean Wilderness, located on the western side of the lower Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea area. He wanders aimlessly for 40 days and 40 nights.

**How long is Lent?** Forty days and forty nights with 6 days and nights to remember the Sabbath. Forty is a big time Jesus number. *And Jesus*, he’s a baby believer after just having been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. God told him that he was the Beloved, but I don’t know if he really believed it fully yet when the devil got involved with him in the wilderness.

And the devil is a real devil in Luke’s account. This is not a devilish character or Jesus’ crazy brain speaking. The forces of good and evil are fighting for control of Jesus. The best way to torture him is with hunger and thirst. What a son of God. He made it through forty days without food and water and he was so hungry and so thirsty. And so, the Devil offers the first temptation, “Since you’re God’s Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread.” (Luke 4:3)

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy, “It takes more than bread to really live.” (Luke 4:4)

Sometimes, I use poetry to understand scripture. Why? Well, the complexities of the story, the aspects which I take seriously but not literally in the Bible, as a devout Christian and the daughter of a scientist who believes that science is real allows me to understand allegory, metaphor, and parables. And my faith is real. My faith challenges me to believe. Jesus did the same thing with his audience. He used poetry in the form of parables and metaphors. He began saying things like this, there was some light, or salt, or sheep, and then he used these ordinary aspects of life to teach of God’s love, blessings, wrath and judgment. Like a parent reading to a child at night, he began with the Jesus version of “Once upon a time.”

I like to intersperse my understanding of the scriptures with contemporary poetry and today’s lesson reminded me of Mary Oliver’s long form poem “Sometimes,”

1. Something came up

Out of the dark.

It wasn’t anything I had ever seen before.

It wasn’t an animal,

Or a flower,

Unless it was both.

Something came up out of the water,

A head the size of a cat

But muddy and without ears.

I don’t know what God is.

I don’t know what death is.

But I believe they have between them

Some fervent and necessary arrangement.

1. Sometimes

Melancholy leaves me breathless.

1. Later I was in a field full of sunflowers.

I was feeling the heat of midsummer.

I was thinking of the sweet, electric

Drowse of creation,

When it began to break.

In the west, clouds gathered.

Thunderheads.

In an hour the sky was filled with them.

In an hour the sky was filled

with the sweetness of rain and the blast of lightning.

Followed by the deep bells of thunder.

Water from the heavens! Electricity from the source!

Both of them mad to create something!

The lightning brighter than any flower.

The thunder without a drowsy bone in its body.

4.

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished*

*Tell about it. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

The devil tempts Jesus a second time. This time he offers him pleasure. “For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, “They’re yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works.”

Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.” (Luke 4:5-8)

Let’s hop back into the long form poem “Sometimes.” For it is sometimes that we too find ourselves in the loneliness, in the wilderness, bewildered, even naked and afraid. And God is better, better than all our fears. Braver than all our bravado. Stronger than all our courage. And God abides among us. For our God is one who dwells among us, walking in the Garden with Eve and Adam, speaking from a bush, appearing in a lion’s den, and becoming God incarnate in the body of an infant named Jesus.

Mary Oliver was a woman when she wrote most of her poems, and yet, her miserable childhood where she was sexually abused by her own father, started her running into the wilderness during the day and skipping school to hide from the children who mocked her and her father who frightened her. The quiet legend from Provincetown who observed everything and lived in a shack by the sea with her true love Molly Malone Cook a photographer and her life partner for over 40 years writes,

5.

Two or three times in my life I discovered love.

Each time it seemed to solve everything.

Each time it solved a great many things

But not everything.

Yet left me as grateful as if it had indeed, and

Thoroughly, solved everything.

6.

God, rest in my heart

And fortify me,

Take away my hunger for answers,

let the hours play upon my body

like the hands of my beloved.

Let the cathead appear again----

The smallest of your mysteries,

Some wild cousin of my own blood probably---

Some cousin of my own wild blood probably,

In the black dinner-bowl of the pond.

7.

Death waits for me, I know it, around

One corner or another.

This doesn’t amuse me.

Neither does it frighten me.

After the rain, I went back into the field of sunflowers.

It was cool, and I was anything but drowsy.

I walked slowly, and listened

To the crazy roots, in the drenched earth, laughing and growing.

We return to Jesus in the wilderness and his third temptation. “For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, “If you are God’s son, jump. It’s written, isn’t it, that ‘he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone’?”

“Yes,” said Jesus, “and it’s also written, ‘Don’t you dare tempt the Lord your God.’”

That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.

* Where in your life have you found yourself tempted?
* Have you ever seen the rain?
* Have you ever faced the Devil? He comes in many forms.

Ask Mary Oliver, he came in the face of her father.

* What do you do when you are tempted? What do I do?

And hear the good news, even Jesus was tested and tempted.

Do not beat yourself up if you have hungered, if you have longed, if you have put others before God or hated yourself. For if it was hard for Jesus, it will be harder for us. And we, we live in wilderness times right now. Wildfires in our landscapes and political scapes. We are exhausted, overstimulated, fighting battles to survive at home, at work, on a national and international level. And we live in bodies: male and female and in between. We have bodies that grow tired, grow hungry and thirsty. We are mortal. And this week, on Ash Wednesday, we smudged our foreheads with the sign of a cross made from the burnt ashes of last year’s palms, reminding ourselves when we look in the mirror that this is the only life we get. In the end is our beginning.

And so, let us repeat the refrain from Mary Oliver’s poem;

4.

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished*

*Tell about it. [[2]](#footnote-2)*

*Amen.*

1. From Poem “Sometimes,” Devotions: The Selected Poems Of Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver, (Penguin Press: New York, 2017) p. 104-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Poem “Sometimes,” Devotions: The Selected Poems Of Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver, (Penguin Press: New York, 2017) p. 104-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)