

Kirk of St James
Sunday February 18, 2018
Sermon "In the Wilderness"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

On Ash Wednesday we paused for a moment. We wore ash both as a sign of our inward commitment and an outward sign of repentance. That little bit of Ash, created from the palm crosses from the year before is so simple you perhaps wonder why we bother. Yet that little bit of ash also begins one of the most important parts of our Christian year. When we walk in solidarity with Jesus Christ on his way to the cross. For forty days just as the Messiah once spent forty days in the wilderness, we journey through lent. A couple hours after that service on Wednesday an image was broadcast across the news, a mother weeping outside a school in Florida, a cross in ash still clearly marked on her forehead, that is most likely where she was when she received the call. The world was once again cast into the wilderness as we listened with a growing sense of horror. It was a difficult week to find words because none of them are the right ones.

I came across a sermon written by a friend about this first week of Lent. Rev. Hugh Donnelly reflected on the challenge of the wilderness for a modern world. He wrote

"Edvard Munch was a Norwegian painter.

His most famous work is one you've probably seen: *The Scream*.

It shows a distorted figure on a bridge,

hands covering ears,

eyes and mouth open wide with fear.

Munch said that he was walking with two friends one night on a bridge in Oslo

and had an anxiety attack;

it came upon him like a scream.

The painting is not a self portrait; Munch was not painting himself.

And the Scream portrayed is not just his scream;

it is, rather, the scream of modern-day anxiety and existential angst.

it is your scream and my scream;

it is the scream of a people caught in a whirlwind of change and fear.
Munch was not interested in portraying reality as we *see it*.

Rather, much of his artwork was an embodiment of the deep feelings that we carry.

When Munch's art was shown in Germany, it was received with little praise.

In the late 1800's, society liked artwork to be realistic in a pretty sort of way:
landscapes, flowers...

Munch's interior work was too much for the art community in Berlin.

Too raw, perhaps.

Best not let such wild expression of our inner nature
linger on the walls for too long...

The show lasted less than a week.

Raw humanity is hard to see.

Strong emotion sets us on edge.

A scream of angst is not something we enjoy hearing (or seeing in art).

So, we tend not to linger too long in a place of angst, pain, sadness.

We quickly try to fix the things that are causing the pain.

We don't linger too long in front of art like this.

It presents us too vividly with a part of humanity
we'd rather not confront.

Interestingly, our book study on grief and loss picked up on these same ideas this past week. One of our chapters discussed how poorly we deal with loss in our modern world. For example, when one of the authors was a young boy his dog died. His father told him "don't worry we will get you a new one." So, they did go and pick out a new dog but, he struggled. Getting a new dog did not replace the deep sense of loss he felt. How many times have people said to us "Don't worry we can get another" or, "you have to be strong for others." How about "There is plenty of time, or fish in the sea." Keep busy don't think about your loss becomes a way of life. How many times have people asked you "how you are you?" and you said "I am fine" but not truly meant it? Likely more than we would like to admit. We have also been in the reverse situation, standing with someone who has experienced loss and we have no idea

what to say. I find myself there time and again. So often in a receiving line at a wake I scramble for what to say when I come to the family.

My siblings and I all worked at my parents' shop growing up. One of the memories that has always stuck with me happened at work one day when my sister was waiting on a customer. He asked as most of us do "How are you today?" as she collected his change. Then just as she was about to hand it over to him she burst into tears because she had had a rotten day. The poor man had a look of absolute horror on his face. He just needed his ham and honey mustard and asked an innocent question with no thought of an honest answer. When we come up against raw human emotion it can be incredibly uncomfortable.

The season of Lent is about sitting with uncomfortable emotions. It lacks the joy and colour of the advent season. It stretches out over the cold, grey months of winter when time feels long, yet the days feel short. It would be far better to go straight into the joy of Easter morning, and forget that Good Friday must happen. Why bother standing in the shadow of the cross, when we know we will eventually stand in the light of an empty tomb? We need those moments with the cross because we know it is a necessary part of life. To love and care in this world also means that we will feel grief and loss.

Today in Mark Jesus goes from the mountain top experience of baptism, to then being driven out into the wilderness. There depending on what gospel you read he is tempted by Satan, or as in Mark confronted by wild beasts. For forty days Jesus remains there alone, facing pain, challenges and difficulty but, he never runs from it. He also never runs from the impossible reality of the cross. Even when he wishes it could be different. As Hugh rightfully points out the cross " is also a part of God's activity in the world.

The cross represents the God who *chooses* suffering
because this God knows just how much we suffer.
This is the God who feels our pain of disease and brokenness
in those times when everyone knows there is no cure.
This is the God who doesn't rush too quickly away from
the wild beasts,
but sits with them,
because sometimes you can't run away from them.
This is the God who suffers, who *chooses* to suffer, with humanity.

There is a deep well of lament in the Bible. Lament for everything from injustice, to barrenness, to unrealized hope. Grief and lament take up a significant part of the Bible. Time and again people are forced to deal with it head on. There are numerous characters in the Bible who struggle to do that but, they work on it.

The same should go for us. It is okay to have moments where you feel grief and your answer to the question "how are you doing?" does not have to be "I am fine." There is time in all our lives where we find ourselves in the wilderness. In fact, we may find we need to be there as uncomfortable as that reality is.

Hugh had a wonderful conclusion and I must say I agree with him when he wrote
"Maybe we'll discover that we don't need to leave the wilderness to find God.
For God will meet us *in* the wilderness.

After all, Jesus went there before we did. Lingered there in order to meet us.
The Lord does not abandon us to the wild beasts.
We endure the beasts with the Lord at our side.

May this season of Lent bring you peace and healing wherever you need it most in your lives and hearts. When you find yourself in the wilderness struggling with grief may you find a friend you can be honest with and feel the presence of God who never leaves us.