



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 10, 2019
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
SIGHT, SOUND AND SILENCE: STILL LENT

Opening Ourselves to the Presence of God Genesis 3:1-8; Mark 1:1-13

For thousands of years, people have followed particular calendars to mark the passage of time and to anticipate what is yet to come. For us, the Gregorian calendar marks our days, months, and years. It reminds us of birthdays, anniversaries of all kinds, special days, and holidays. It guides our work, our play, our rest, our education, and our politics. We even use it to maximize the hours of light in our days. I would say that it works quite well.

As followers of Christ, we also rely on another calendar. Various known as the Christian calendar, the Church calendar, and the liturgical calendar, it follows the life of Christ and the Church, marking special events to be sure, but paying particular attention to the rhythms of our faith.

The Christian calendar begins a month before we celebrate the New Year because it begins with the anticipation of Christ's birth which we celebrate on December 25. Advent is the season of longing and preparation when we anticipate both the birth of Jesus and Christ's return at the end of the age. Advent is followed by Epiphany which reminds us of the time Christ was revealed to all of the world, including to us. We realize who Jesus is and what he is about and why he is important for our lives. Then we arrive where we are today, in the shallow waters of Lent, another season of preparation, this time for the celebration of Christ's resurrection. It is a season of opening ourselves to the presence of God.

The Christian calendar is different from our every day calendar because, instead of adjusting our lives to the movement of the earth around the sun, we orient our lives in relation to God. We follow Jesus and pay close attention to his life and thus learn how to better live our lives.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we find ourselves on the banks of the Jordan, not a wide and mighty river as celebrated in so many songs; instead, it is more like a large stream, about a hundred feet across at its widest point. Today, however, something remarkable is happening. As we wade into the shallows, cool, salty water lapping against our ankles, a warm breeze offers a gentle massage on its way downstream. It is a cloudy day as we watch

Jesus make his way into the middle of the river where his cousin John is baptizing people. After talking with John for a few minutes, Jesus leans back and disappears into the water. A gust of wind streaks down the valley as Jesus rises and the sun suddenly slices through the clouds causing the water streaming from his body to sparkle. There is a noise—some think it is thunder—but many claim it to be the voice of God who says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." With the rest of the crowd, we stand still, silent, transfixed by what has happened. Jesus smiles, hugs his cousin, sashes to the other side, and walks off into the wilderness.

No one else is with him, but he is not totally alone because we follow him there. For forty days he will fast. He will listen and look and pray and sing and be silent. He will be still. He knows that he is still human. He knows that he is still God. He will contemplate this strange relationship of being God in flesh, of being son to the father and brother to the world. As we watch and contemplate what this wilderness sojourn means, we understand that it is still Lent for us.

We think of the wilderness in Jesus' day as being more desert than forest, more barren than fertile. Most likely it was, but there were certainly forests and streams and pastures, too. It was called wilderness for a reason: it was a "wild" place. It was raw and untamed and full of life.

Actually, Jesus' journey—and ours—began long before that day in the Jordan River Valley. It started in the first wilderness, the one we usually think of as The Garden. If we want our Lenten experience to be meaningful and valuable for our faith, the wilderness that we enter today should remind us of that first wilderness where our story began, in the Garden with the man and the woman we know as Adam and Eve.

The story is as familiar to us as the back of our hand. If we are honest, we will admit that we don't always like to hear it again because it is so fresh, so immediate, so relevant . . . and so true. It is the story of our beginning.

In that first wildness, everything the woman and the man could possibly need was provided. They had food and shelter and . . . well they didn't have clothes at first, but they didn't really need them then! The only thing they apparently lacked was trust because when God told them that everything in their world was at their disposal except the fruit of one tree, they figured that was exactly where they needed to dine. The story of the Garden, of the first "wild place," is a story of abundance and generosity on God's part and a lack

of gratitude and trust leading to disobedience on the humans' part. It is a story of our humanity and mortality.

We know that the consequence of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil is that they had to leave the garden, the wilderness of abundance where God even walked on occasion. During Lent, however, it is important for us to brave those flaming swords that guard the entrance and to step back inside that first wilderness because there is much we can learn.

Speaking at an event called "The Sound of Faith" a few years ago, Rabbi Michael Zedek translated a verse from this story: "They heard the voice of God walking about in the garden at the breezy part of the day, and the man and woman hid from the presence of God among the trees.' The Hebrew word translated hid," he said, "is in fact reflexive, which means, provocatively, they hid from themselves. So the question or challenge [is], what might happen if we stopped hiding from self and others?"¹

What a dramatic image! How many of us would love to hear God—just once? What if you could take an evening stroll with God, talking about the events of the day? Yet, when our inaugural parents heard God crunching leaves underfoot, tripping over vines, and calling their names, they hid! They heard God and hid from God!

Do we still hide from God and other people and ourselves? Of course we do! It is not necessarily because we are horrible people with dark and embarrassing secrets. We often hide because of our sense of inadequacy, never feeling like we are "enough." In the Garden of Abundance, Eve and Adam somehow felt like they didn't have enough when they actually had far more than they would ever need. To fill that need they took the fruit they really did not need. That garden is our wilderness.

That is why Rabbi Zedek asked a simple and profound question: What might happen if we stopped hiding from ourselves, from one another, and from God? This is the question of Lent. We are invited into a wilderness that is abundant with everything we need if we will but open ourselves to the presence of God, of one another, and of ourselves. But how?

¹Rabbi Michael Zedek, Comments at the Sounds of Faith program held at the Lutheran School of Theology Chicago on Sunday, October 24, 2010; available online at: <http://harranfoundation.org/library/>. Additional quotes and insights of Rabbi Zedek are from this address.

Rabbi Zedek does not leave us alone in the wilderness of our faith. He offers a suggestion from the shared roots of our faith. We know from the long story of the Hebrew people that once they gained their freedom and made their way through the wilderness (beginning to sound familiar?), God led them back to the Promised Land, a far more tangible land of abundance. Before entering the Promised Land, Moses called the people together to give them guidance in how to live with God and one another in this new garden of life. What he said is known as the "watchword" of the Jewish faith, which means it is important for us as well, especially since Jesus referred to it as the most important commandment. You know it well: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). At other places in scripture, God added and Jesus affirmed that we should love our neighbors as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18).

In Jewish life, this commandment, recited during worship, is known as the *Shema*, from the first word which means "to hear." *Shema Israel* – Hear, O Israel. The rabbi said, "[The Shema] urges us to really listen, to really hear each other. That in so doing, we shall learn something about the holy one and ourselves." He offers us a brilliant way to remember this principle. In the Hebrew language, the word *shema* is written as three consonants, the *shin*, the *mem*, and the *ayin*. Sounding out each of these consonants can guide us on our journey: "Shin, SHHHHH. Be quiet. Mem, mmmmm. Think. Consider. Ayin, pronounced as it were, ahhhhh, intending, perhaps for us to finally, finally, listen and be wise." *Shema*: Shhhhh. Mmmmmm. Ahhhhh! Listen. Think. Discover.

Over these next few weeks as we look and listen and open ourselves to God, it is going to be tempting to wonder where God is or what God is. Again, Rabbi Zedek offers a wise suggestion. A better question to ask or a better focus for our attention is "When is God?" Not, "Where does God makes himself known?" but, "When do I sense God near?" Rather than wondering "What is God like?" pay attention to what you experience when God manifests himself. "When" can happen regardless of where we are, what we are doing, or what we are asking. If we look for God in a particular place, we may choose the wrong place. If we expect God to have certain characteristics, we might pass him by. If, however, we listen for the sounds of God walking nearby or notice evidence of God around us, if we are open to God whenever God might reveal himself and in whatever form, then we will never miss God . . . and God won't miss us either.

Jesus will be in the wilderness for forty days and we will be with him. He will listen and look and silently contemplate whatever happens and whatever he discovers. When he is ready, he will leave the wilderness of his sojourn and return to the ordinariness of life—still Jesus, but ready to be and do what God has been dreaming for him all along.

What will you do with your forty days in the wilderness of God's love? *Shema*: hear! Shhhhh - let us listen and look. Mmmmmm - let us be silent and discover the wonders of life God offers us. Ahhhhh - let us learn and grow as we open ourselves to God and one another. It is still Lent: *Shema*!

March 10, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this season when our spiritual focus is turned inward, O God, we become uneasy with the realization that you see us as we really are and know us completely. Like Adam and Eve who hid themselves from you, we are sometimes ashamed and afraid because of the things we have done and the people we are, so we deny your presence in our lives or fail to open ourselves completely to you. Our actions are short-sighted and our attitudes selfish. We seek to control others rather than accept them, to try to change them rather than love them. We make hasty decisions, utter hurtful words, and respond with apathy. O Lord, as we travel with Christ along his wilderness journey, teach us, once again, to be still and know that you are God. Focus our attention on mending our relationships with you and with one another. Heal our hurts and calm our souls so that as we become restored in you, we might also be challenged and inspired to reach out in your name to a hurting world.

Grant us the vision in this season of Lent and beyond to look deeply at our own lives while seeing the rest of your children through your eyes of compassion. Help us to see all the ways that you are at work in our world, especially in the lowly and small, in the meek and poor, in the vulnerable places where we would not think to look for you. Teach us to look at those whom we might judge or about whom we make assumptions because of differences in language or creed, custom or opinion as your beloved children and the neighbors we are called to serve. Help us to reach out beyond ourselves to offer comfort to those who mourn, healing to those who are sick, welcome to those who are lonely, and hope to those who suffer. May we recognize in every face we see, every circumstance we encounter, every possibility that is ours, your Spirit who is at work, empowering and transforming us and all of creation. Holy God, in the busyness of life and the demands of our days, grant us moments of peaceful stillness and quiet contemplation, that we might hear the tender beating of your heart and there find new life.

In the name of the One whose life, death and resurrection have given us a vision of joyful and abundant life now and eternal life with you, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister