

The Wilderness Way

Sermon preached on Matthew 4:1-11

The first Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020

St. George's Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, VA

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I grew up and live in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. Almost all of the time, the woodsy wilderness is a place of retreat and restoration for me. I love the smell of trails laden with soggy leaves. I will never tire of seeing mountains crowned with morning mist. I feel most at ease with a purple ridgeline in view—from bedroom windows, or street corners. The wilderness is home to me—it’s where I learned how to be a child, covered in dirt and wonder. It’s where I learned how to rest, the kind of rest that comes from laying in a tent on the ground and sleeping from sundown to sunup. It’s where I first knew the calm that comes from a breeze that kisses you as it sifts through the trees.

But unfortunately, the wilderness is not always a wellspring of beauty and calm, for the wilderness is also a place of deep discomfort that tests every bit of our strength and twists our best-laid plans into journeys with unmarked trails. While I have chosen to enter the wilderness willingly many times in my life, for both its wonder and its ability to strip me down to my core, I have also found myself in wilderness spaces I did not choose—the difficult paths I did not want to tread, the journeys I stumbled my way through.

I did not choose the wilderness space of grief and loss when my mother died when I was a young. I did not choose the wilderness of growing up a surrogate mom to my little sister, an adolescent desperate to write a new ending to our tragedy. I did not choose the second wave of motherlessness I would experience when my maternal grandmother, who helped raise us, would die in old age. And I did not choose the hundreds of diversions along the wilderness way of my life—the many times I got lost, fell down, turned back, ran out of food, was left brokenhearted and bruised.

I imagine there are wilderness spaces you have found yourself in that were not of your choosing. The wilderness of debilitating or chronic illness. The wilderness of losing your faith, or your job, or an identity that helped you find your way in the world. The wilderness of divorce, family trauma, breakups with partners and friends. The wilderness of grief, of miscarriage, of depression.

There are so many types of wilderness we do not choose to enter—spaces we have avoided and tried to run away from.

Jesus didn't *choose* the wilderness, either—at least not in today's story from Matthew. Here, in the first event after his baptism, the Spirit *leads* Jesus up into the wilderness. The Greek word used here for “led” has a connotation of being “launched.” In other words, the Spirit “launched” Jesus up the mountain, as if giving him a leg up for his climb. How's that for a way he did not choose? This was Jesus' grand premier into his ministry? Not toward people and the city and those who needed healing, but away from them, up into the high elevations of the desert? And there, deprived of food and water, he faces the great tempter—who flaunts before him all the worldly treasures of unchecked power and control.

The tempter tries to offer Jesus an easy way out—shallow relief from his hunger and hardship. But Jesus holds his ground. Even as he wrestles with his exhaustion, his mission, his identity, his desires, his very demanding calling, he stays put. He doesn't run away. He doesn't seek comfort to escape the pain. In fact, he leans in—trudging onward, convinced that the wilderness has formative treasures he can't yet see.

I wonder if Jesus began his ministry this way because he needed to learn how to bear witness to pain without running from it. I wonder if he needed to sit high on that mountain—not to dominate the earth, but to be humbled by it. To be vulnerable enough to be cared for by the angels that tended to him. To be present to the glory of simple things—wind that becomes breath, light that lines the horizon, stone that fills with the sun's warmth, land that stretches beyond what the eye can see.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness looking for a quick exit, what might it look like to keep walking, to press on believing there is something worth discovering along the way? To trust that, even if we did not choose to enter the wilderness, God chooses to walk with us, never leaving our side?

When I was in college, I spent a semester studying abroad in New Zealand, which really means that I spent 6 months learning the great outdoors, testing the limits of my adrenaline, and absorbing all the nuances of Kiwi culture instead of soaking up formal knowledge inside a classroom.

One trip, I joined my friends, Allison and Trubman, to hike, or, rather, what Kiwi's call “tramp,” at Mt. Taranaki, an active volcano with one of the most symmetrical volcanic cones in the world. In fact, it so closely resembles Japan's Mt. Fuji that it has been filmed for movies like *The Last Samurai*. Mt. Taranaki stands tall and pristine, a nearly perfect cone within a region of flat plains.

We decided to hike a 4 day circuit loop, which climbs high around the mountain, offering stunning views of the volcano's snow-crowned peak. My friend Trubman was a pack-rat sort of backpacker who usually towed along random objects that we might need JUST IN CASE, like extra boot laces, newspaper, candles, rubber bands, binder clips, you name it... But, as soon as we arrived at the trailhead, Trubman stepped out of the car, looked down, and realized he had forgotten his hiking boots. All he had were the old worn-in sneakers he was wearing, which had slick bottoms where the tread had completely run down, and holes in the toes. We laughed it off, called his sneakers bowling shoes, and hit the trail. Then it started to rain.

Our steep trail up the mountain quickly turned into a muddy slip-in-slide. Rain pummelled our backs. Hail beat against our packs like pellets.

We trudged up the mountain for hours, maneuvering our way through the creek bed that was once a trail. We kept looking up, expecting, hoping, wishing, to spot a glimpse of the beauty of the volcano we were trespassing upon, but all we could see was the rain swiping across our faces. Each bend led us to the same short-sighted, foggy view. The volcano remained illusive, hidden by the wrath of the storm clouds brewing around it. We were soggy and uncomfortable, but for some reason—maybe because we didn't have money to pay for a hostel, or because we were young and idealistic—we never turned back. We kept on, convinced that our muddy scramble would lead us to something that would make the trip feel worthwhile.

Though we had all taken a few falls throughout the day, Trubman was by far the muddiest. We watched him slide and tumble, his shoes mud slippers gliding him with every step instead of gripping him in place. Near the end of the day, when we were soaked to our core and more than ready to reach our destination for the evening, Allison and I glanced up to see Trubman glide, lose his balance, and fall face-first into the mud.

We rushed to him; he stood up cupping his hand to his eye. Allison, inspecting his injury, carefully removed a two-inch needle of a stick that had pierced the skin of his face, barely missing his eye. Though blood began to stream down his cheek, he insisted that we keep hiking because the hut where we were staying for the night was less than a mile away and it was getting dark. So, we trudged along, us navigating the trail through the shadows cast by the relentless rain, Trubman, through the opening of now one eye.

When we reached our hut about 10 minutes later, an American couple—the first backpackers we met on the trail—greeted us.

When they saw the blood on Trubman's face, they rushed to him with personal first aid kits in hand. The woman was a doctor and her husband was a nurse. They cleaned and patched up his eye, though it was already swollen shut.



The next morning, we woke up to blue sky. The haze of rain and clouds had finally given way to shimmering sunlight.

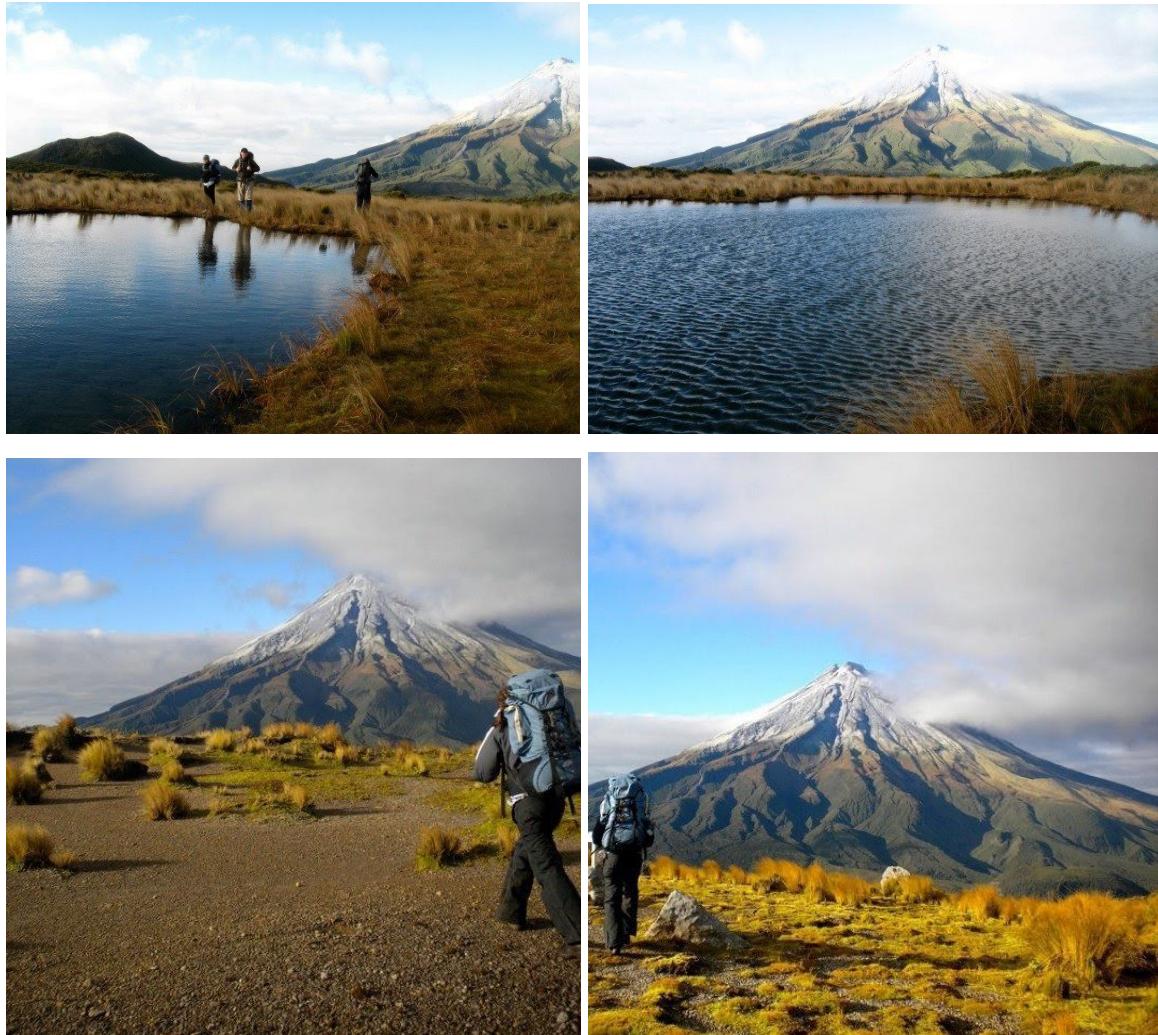


Quickly, we packed up our stuff, left the hut, turned the corner and gasped at the sight before us.

Mt. Taranaki stood majestic and magical, as if a sacred temple on a hill. Thin clouds danced around its rim. It was beautiful, breathtaking, and holy.



So we hiked all day with our new American friends, angels in disguise, lifting our eyes in between steps to peer up at the mountain, each time more in awe than the last glance, filled with wonder at the beauty that had been lurking behind the previous day's storm.



Friends, I wish the wilderness were easy. I wish it was always safe and comfortable and calm. I wish it did not leave us with bruises and scars.

But I do know this—the wilderness journey is temporary. It does not last forever. When we have the courage to stick it out, to keep walking, to lean into discomfort, to keep trusting that the Spirit is the one who helps us find our way, we *do* leave the wilderness—different than how we entered it. We learn, I think, that the wilderness makes us more holy and more human. The wilderness shapes us into who we're called to be.

And so I pray that as you walk the wilderness way this Lent, you get glimpses of breath-taking beauty, of the treasure we find in unexpected places when the clouds and the storm and the rain finally let up and we step into the light of a new day and can finally see:

Aha, here it is. It was here all along. God was here all along. Amen.

Charge & Benediction:

Whenever I live paint for worship, my hope and prayer is that you will see whatever you need to see in the painting as it comes to life—and I hope you know, that no matter what you see, thinking about, you are right.

I invite you to gaze upon the painting in process. Imagine placing yourself somewhere in this wilderness scene. Where are you?

Friends, the wilderness is not always a place we choose to enter, but it is a place that forms us into who we're meant to be.

So journey with the gifts of the wilderness—be free to let go of control.

Be messy and malleable.

Explore an unmarked path.

Be present to the glory of simple things.

Tend to those who walk beside you—for we are each other's angels, and none of us can survive the wilderness alone.

And mostly, trust that God is present in unexpected places—drawing near to us in moments of breathless beauty, in the moments of striking clarity when we realize why the journey has brought us here.

And as we walk,

May God bless us and keep us.

May God's face shine down upon us.

May God be gracious and give us peace, forever and ever, Amen.