

## **Into the Wild**

Rev. John Allen

The story of our faith starts in the wilderness. Outside the safety of city walls. Where the roads don't reach. Beside an unruly river. In the hands of an untamed man.

Jesus' ministry begins when he leaves town, and goes out to the wilderness. To a wild place without waypoints or markers.

The story starts in the wilderness.

And this wasn't the first time God had started something new in the wilderness. Generations before, Jesus' ancestors had fled slavery in Egypt only to end up trapped in the wilderness for forty years.

Led by Moses through the divided waters of the red sea, they spent a generation making their way together through unfamiliar and unforgiving terrain, sustained only by miracles.

The story starts in the wilderness.

And it's no accident that both these transformative stories take place in the wilderness. Because the wilderness is a place of transformation. Sometimes you need to get far away from everything familiar in order to be open to something new.

We don't always realize it, but the places and patterns of our everyday lives constrain our imagination. We drive and walk the same routes time and time again, we see the same places, and talk to the same people.

The patterns of our everyday lives reinforce what we see and what we ignore.

The wilderness is disorienting. It takes away these points of orientation that limit our imagination. Time in wild places opens us up to new possibilities.

Now, it is easy to turn this truth into a very romantic one. I am sure that many of you, like me, have had significant experiences of a relatively comfortable trip to a foreign country, or a journey into a vast natural space, that was formative for you.

The idea of transformation in the wilderness may conjure up the image of Thoreau at Walden, seeking self-improvement beside a tranquil waters of a picturesque pond.

But this is not how the Israelites would have seen the wilderness. And it is not how people in Jesus' time would have seen the wilderness.

To them it was not unspoiled beauty. It was danger. It was a place of chaos beyond the safe control of walled cities. It was a place of dangerous animals and untrustworthy characters.

And the transformation that our ancestors in faith encountered in the wilderness. It was not idyllic or serene. It was terrifying.

Maybe you have known this wilderness in your life too. The moments of transformation that were anything but comfortable or serene.

And I think all of us are in such a wilderness right now.

Like many of you, I have been rapt by the images of the insurrection at our capital this week. I think I will long remember very vividly the moment I first saw the image of one member of the mob sitting on the dias of the Senate. I will long remember vividly the moment I first saw the image of capital police officers with their guns drawn barricading the door of the house floor. Those images took us to the wilderness. Not a serene beautiful place, but a place that just looked and felt so unfamiliar. I am used to seeing that room as it appears on CSPAN. Buttoned up. Routine. Orderly. Hushed.

Seeing people dressed like soldiers climbing through those halls was shockingly disorienting.

I have like you listened this week as journalists and commentators grapple for the right words to describe the assault on the peaceful transition of power that took place this week, because the truth is that most of us spent our whole lives believing—despite the warnings of many wise people—that nothing like this would actually ever actually happen.

Friends we are in the wilderness.

We are shuttered into our homes by a raging pandemic. We are witnessing naked efforts to undermine the integrity of our democratic governments. And we are reeling from what—I pray—are the desperate last gasps of white supremacy in our nation.

We are in the wilderness.

And the story of our faith starts in the wilderness.

Jesus Baptism in the Wilderness is a sign to us that in spaces of chaos and fear, in spaces where we do not know quite where we are or where we are going, two things happen at the same time.

Transformation and temptation.

When Jesus goes into the wilderness he encounters both the transformative spirit of God which alights on him from heaven and proclaims his belovedness to the world. He is inspired and empowered by the spirit which sends him back into the world he knows in order to change it forever, to place his own hands on the arc of history and bend it toward love and justice.

And when Jesus goes into the wilderness, he is tempted. Tempted with offers of quick riches to be made in the ashes of hope, tempted toward nihilism in a world that seems to be spinning out of control, tempted toward blasphemy in his world that feels abandoned by God.

Transformation and temptation.

These are on offer in our wilderness too.

This moment of disruption and disorientation could tempt us. It could tempt us to withdraw further from the pain of what we can scarcely bear. It could tempt us to turn inward and double-down on self-interest looking out for ourselves and our families at the expense of our collective good. It could tempt us to surrender our faith in the presence of God in our lives and in our world.

Or. This could be a moment of transformation.

In this moment of disorientation. In this wilderness. We could open ourselves to be remade. We could renew our commitment to our collective good. We could recover our courage to stand up for what is right and true. We could determine not to patch over the cracks and tears of this moment, but rather peel them back to try to truly heal the deeper wounds of our common life. We could renew our confidence that what each do and say, and what we each tolerate, impacts who we become together.

The roots of our faith are set in the fact that for both the Israelites and for Jesus, despite the powerful temptations of the wilderness, it was ultimately for them a place of transformation, a place of new beginning, of becoming.

And the root of a hopeful future for us will need to be set in this moment. Set in this disorienting, chaotic, and wild moment.

Set in the fact that this time we chose the transformation that God sets before us in moments like this.