

# “Wild Prayers”

(2 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 1, Valentine's Day, 2/14/2016, dedicated to the memory of Tad Jeffery who passed to eternal life, 2/13/16, to Grace Glaros who is 8 years old today and also celebrates her 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of baptism today, to the love of my life, Susan E. Sitler, to St. Valentine and all the lovers in this church and in our faith tradition who lead with love every day in their interaction with people and always to the glory of God!

*“Wild Prayers”*

*(2 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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At 26 years old, Cheryl Strayed, just a few years younger than Jesus when he ventured into his wilderness, found herself all alone and setting out on a journey. It was a journey of 94 days that would take her over a 1,000 miles into barren wilderness. Cheryl chronicles her story in *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*:

*“I had diverged, digressed, wandered, and become wild. I didn't embrace the word as my new name because it defined negative aspects of my circumstances or life, but because even in my darkest days—those very days in which I was naming myself—I saw the power of the darkness. Saw that, in fact, I had strayed and that I was a stray and that from the wild places my straying had brought me, I knew things I couldn't have known before... I was trying to heal. Trying to get the bad out of my system so I could be good again. (I was trying) to cure me of myself.”*

One day at a time, she put one foot in front of the other and continued to walk – mostly alone. Her companion on the journey was her memories of all that she screwed up and lost. Her **mother's death, her failed marriage**, her venture into heroin and its hold on her life which led her deeper into darkness. Most all of her days and nights in the wild, Cheryl was completely alone. She simply kept moving.

*“Uncertain as I was as I pushed forward, I felt right in my pushing, as if the effort itself meant something. That perhaps being amidst the undesecrated beauty of the wilderness meant I too could be undesecrated, regardless of the regrettable things I'd done to others or myself or the regrettable things that had been done to me. Of all the things I'd been skeptical about, I didn't feel skeptical about this: **the wilderness had a clarity that included me.**”*

*“The wilderness had a clarity that included me.”*

I wonder if those words resonated in the spirit of Jesus as he rose from the waters of baptism in the Jordan River and climbed high into the mountains of wilderness west of the Jordan? There, accompanied only by The Holy Spirit and with no food in his body for 40 days and nights, he would be tempted and tested by “the Slanderer” – the one our text calls “the devil.” In the end, the wilderness certainly had a clarity which included Jesus.

Weakened, starving, hungry beyond belief, Jesus is met by his adversary in the desert. But, as the story unfolds, we see that theirs is a conversation not a confrontation. The devil is more of a “desert companion” than a man with horns, a tail and a spear – all while slithering around in a red outfit. Let's give the devil his due. His timing is perfect.

Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out a demon or healed a sick person. Except for the few who were present down in the waters of the Jordan River, no one really has much of an **inkling that this God's chosen one** – the Messiah come to save the world. No. He is a 20-something man, alone and hungry in the desert. He is poised at the edge of his ministry. What will it look like? What will the shape and nature of his ministry be?

We don't get a psychological profile – just a series of brief conversations. We meet a young man who is struggling to **figure out what it means to be about God's business**. The Devil bothers with this one because he is vulnerable to temptation. He is open to the conversation. Temptation in **times like this doesn't come to those who are all messed up**. They have already crossed one line after another and found themselves caught in the snares of temptation. Rather, temptation comes to those who have presented themselves as pure and good.

The Slanderer is not as concerned about those who look a lot like Cheryl Strayed. He already has them in his hip pocket. Their wilderness journey is one of return to God **and sanity and health**. **Theirs is (in Cheryl's words), "Finding a way to cure myself."** No, the Slanderer goes after the ones who look a lot like Jesus. They are poised for destruction – which is his purpose and his goal.

The testing or temptation of Jesus is more than a struggle between good and evil. Scripture portrays evil in many ways. Sometimes it is cosmic struggle while other times it is the struggle of the soul – the struggle taking place within ourselves. Whether interior or cosmic in nature, the essence of evil is a strong opposition to love, health, wholeness and peace. And that is why those most dedicated to these essential elements of God's goodness in this world, wear a big target on their chests for the Slanderer to take aim at. Jesus' target is the biggest of all.

And the three tests to his goodness that are shot at his target are personal, political and religious in nature. First, the Slanderer wants to know if Jesus will be about the business of turning stones to bread? The answer is "No." Second, will Jesus submit to the rulers of this world to achieve good for the people of this world? The answer is "No." Third, will Jesus win Jerusalem by playing "Superman" and avoiding death by a supernatural display of power? In other words, will he win by coercion? Once again, "No." These are wild tests for wilderness living. And in each case, Jesus answers the test. Armed with the Holy Spirit, he is able to reject the way of flaunting miracles and the language and actions of the political sword which cuts everyone when it is swung at foes. Although Jesus prevails,

Luke tells us that the devil will watch and wait for an “opportune time to return.”

As we encounter the wilderness walk of Jesus, I can’t help think of Cheryl Strayed (whose name I love!). So many of us have so much in common with this wild woman whose wilderness journey brought clarity to her life. I can’t help thinking of the wild moments of our lives and this world which seem to drag us down and knock us out. They are the times which push us into the wilderness to begin with. Getting mugged in the wilderness of our city can happen just as readily as getting knocked down in the wilderness alone with nothing but a Holy Spirit and a less than Holy Slanderer.

Our wilderness prayers are raw and possibly vulgar. We may cry out, “*Where are you God? Show yourself to me!*” or “*Why have you left me here all alone? Why have you abandoned me like this?*” (These are the “G” rated versions of what is on the tip of our tongues!). Our wilderness prayers are offered “crying out loud.” They are screamed out when no one seems to be close enough to hear – except God and the beasts of the wild who are listening and watching.

In his book, *Letters from the Desert*, Brother Carlo Carretto, who lived in the Sahara Desert among the poorest of God’s desert people, addresses these wild prayers screamed out in the wilderness. He reminds us that our

God, who delivered his son from the Wilderness, will not abandon us. *“God can do everything. I can do nothing. But, if I offer this nothing in prayer to God, everything becomes possible in me. God will give me the grace to transform myself.... The God of the Impossible won’t ignore my cry”* (Carlos Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1972, pp. 135-136).

Brother Carlos shares so many insights about Wild Prayers in his little books. Going into the Sahara Desert from community organizing in Italy among Catholic Youth, he also came to know and love the desert and God’s presence there. He especially loved the silence of deserts nights. He found the night in the desert was friendly. He wrote these words, *“When I first came to the desert I was afraid of the night... The darkness of faith is necessary, for God’s light is too great. It wounds”* (p. 140). But he became open to the beauty of the darkest nights.

In the night, in the desert, Abraham prayed for God’s deliverance. In the night, in the desert, Moses received God’s blessing and God’s commandments. In the night, in the desert, the shepherd David grew in relationship with God. In the night, the Psalms were born in his heart. In the night, our Savior was born. In the night he escaped into the desert with his mother and father. In the night, he prayed in

garden and out of the night and into the dawn, he was raised from the dead.

To this end, in all his desert time, Brother Carlos came to see the night and its bright, beautiful skies and stars as a true and friendly blessing.

Our wild prayers go out and up to God in the night. Whether the darkness that surrounds us or in the face of the stars which guide us, wild prayers go up and out in the night. And in the midst of our wild prayers, our God of the Impossible hears us and – in time – our prayers are answered.

When you are faced with a wilderness in your life, when you are filled with loneliness and fear, when your prayers feel wild within you and find an even wilder voice as they cry out from you, I pray that these words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta may soak into your soul, *"I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish God didn't trust me so much."*

I pray that in the face of the wild winds of temptation and testing, in the face of the assault of loneliness in the wilderness of your life, in the face of the Slanderer who comes to you when you are most vulnerable and susceptible to being hurt, you will trust the God of the Impossible to get you through your desert time. When you scream out to

God for help, trust that our God, who trusts us, will not give you more than you can handle.

In the words of Cheryl Strayed, it is my wild prayer for you - *“The wilderness has a clarity that will include you.”*  
Amen.

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