

Beloved in the Waters and the Wilderness

1/12/2025 – Lynnette Berkhimer (at Westminster Presbyterian, Madison WI)

Well, we're two weeks into this new phase of ours. How's everyone feeling? Who's excited? Yeah! We'll get to experience some new perspectives; we'll get to share our story with some new people. Who's nervous? Yeah... How long will it take us to find a new permanent pastor? What if the process divides us like it too often does in churches? Periods of transition often feel like a vast, unfamiliar wilderness. This uncertainty can make us feel lost and alone. But Scripture invites us to see the wilderness differently. Today, we'll explore how even here in this pastoral transition who we are and where we're called hasn't changed and we are never as alone as we might feel.

After the story of Jesus' baptism that we just read a few minutes ago, Jesus doesn't go straight into ministry. Listen to this at the beginning of Luke chapter 4: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished." See the wilderness throughout the Bible is not just a physical place but represents a whole experience. Think of Hagar from Genesis – we all remember Hagar, right? Ishmael's mother? – She was thrown out into the wilderness by the people who had raped and enslaved her. They give her just a skin of water and a little bread, and it quickly runs out. In despair she lays her son down under a bush and walks far away because she cannot bear to watch him die. Can you imagine? Or think of Miriam and her fellow Israelites who start with dancing, praising the God who "triumphs gloriously" but they quickly forget this attitude once they get into the wilderness. Moses is gone too long, up the mountain. Is he dead? They feel leaderless, so uncertain of their future that they start talking about going back to Egypt. Amazing how we humans will literally choose *anything* – slavery! – rather than the uncertainty of the wilderness. So it's no wonder that we, now, at the end of something good, might wish we could go back to something safe and familiar. Now, Jesus - whose identity is questioned by the devil. The devil repeatedly says, "If you are the Son of God" – *if*. Has the wilderness changed that? We just heard in the baptism story, the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved". Out here, in the hunger and isolation, does the wilderness have the power to undo what God declared? We know this wilderness. For some of us, it looks like grief, burnout, or broken relationships. For our church family, it's transition – this uncertainty about what lies ahead, about who we are becoming. The questions remain the same though: Is anyone here with me? What do we do next? Who are we now? There's no shame in having these questions. Hagar had them. The Israelites had them. Even Jesus faced them. But what if these stories show us more than loneliness and uncertainty? Let's look again at where God is in all of this.

In each of these wilderness stories, God doesn't abandon the people. God's presence is always there, but it's felt differently by each person. When Hagar sits in grief and despair, feeling utterly abandoned, God is right there with her in her pain. Amidst her suffering – not erasing it, not ignoring it, - God opens Hagar's eyes to a well, water for her and her child to survive, a reminder that God sees her suffering, hears her cries, and sustains her in the wilderness. Sometimes, God's presence is felt through tangible provision when it's most needed. When Miriam and the Israelites feel lost and uncertain, God doesn't leave them to wander alone. She becomes their guide: a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, lighting their way through the wilderness to the promises ahead.

Sometimes, God's presence is felt through guidance and a clear destination, even if the journey is unfamiliar. And Jesus, God himself, is not left to face the wilderness alone, severed from the rest of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is with him, reminding him of the identity spoken at his baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved". The Trinity reminds us that God's very nature is relational, and that relationship withstands the wilderness. And it's our own baptism that welcomes *us* into that relationship, too. Sometimes, God's presence is felt in comfort and assurance of who – and whose – we are. In our own times of wilderness, whether it's grief, uncertainty, or transition, it's easy to feel abandoned or unsure of what lies ahead. But these stories remind us that we are not alone in our suffering. Yes, some things are uncertain, but God meets us right where we are, walking with us through the unknown. Yes, the wilderness may be barren and even frightening, but it is not a place of abandonment – it's a place of relationship, a place full of God's presence. A place to stop, to listen, to hear anew the voice of God that's been with us all along: "You are my beloved".

That is not all the wilderness is though. The wilderness is also a place to *respond* to God's presence. Hagar trusts God's provision and raises her son up well. Miriam and the Israelites follow God's guidance and develop what it means for them to live in community. Jesus uses the knowledge of his identity and the words of God to rebuff the devil's temptations.

In the liturgy that we use for baptisms, we aren't just welcomed into the body of Christ – we're also called into Christ's ministry. Baptism reminds us who we are: God's beloved children. And it reminds us of our calling: to participate in God's mission to liberate the oppressed, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger. That baptismal water - the same water that sustained Hagar in the wilderness, that Miriam and the Israelites passed through, that covered Jesus in his baptism – that water still flows. It never really dries up. Our identity and our calling still hold true in the wilderness. And here's the great thing: this baptismal water here is not the only reminder that God has given us. We serve as reminders for each other. We embody God's presence for each other. We are all made in the image of this God who became human himself and graciously adopted us into her family, this God who is inherently relational. We are all one family, called to be in relationship, to be subject to one another. And that's the essence of Christ's mission that our baptism calls us into: to love God and love one another. To love requires relationship. God's love for us brings her close, active in our daily lives. Our love should also bring us close to others: It's the food and reading programs at Thoreau – a partner in our community, the new Racial Equity Work Group to help us stand in solidarity with the marginalized, the simple "Hello, how are you?" to a neighbor. Even in our own time in the wilderness we can keep joining with God in this relational work and then welcome first Rev. Sarah McCulloh Tonje and then whoever comes after her into relationship with us.

So as you leave the sanctuary today, stop by the baptismal water. If you're online you can use any water. All water is a gift from God. Put your hand in, like I did with the kids, and remember your baptism, your identity as beloved. Remember that together, as the body of Christ, we are called to participate in God's mission. Then we'll all go out together, knowing this: even in this wilderness, we are never alone and God is still working. Amen.