

Margreta Wilderness

Silverstone:

Wilderness

by Margreta Silverstone

Introduction

Good morning. It seems that I preach about once a year at Seekers. I should feel comfortable doing this by now. You are members of my community. I have a number of opportunities at work where I am doing public speaking, sometimes off-the-cuff, and do fine. But, I always feel butterflies and I feel them now.

This is the third week in the season of Lent. Celebration Circle has chosen the theme of "A Way in the Wilderness". The 40 days of Lent are a reminder of the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness before beginning his three-year ministry. We are also encouraged to spend time during this period reflecting on our life and preparing ourselves, recommitting ourselves to our path and listening for where God is calling us.

I think the period of Lent is important. It provides us a bit of relief from the up and heady happy time of Christmas and Epiphany and gives us a break before Easter. But it is also hard for me to really engage in the period of Lent, in the experience of wilderness. It is far too easy to skip to the last chapter in the book, to know and remember the end of the story, to live within Lent but knowing all the time that Easter happened, that we overcame the wilderness. Even with the passages it is easy for us to read them knowing the end of

the story. Yes, God was faithful to David. Yes, we know that the Israelites survived the 40 years in the wilderness. And we believe that Jesus lives on.

The challenge for us is to engage in the scripture passages and in our wilderness experiences in life without knowing the end of the story. We need to approach Lent like the [parable in Luke](#). What happened to the fig tree? Did the caretaker give it special attention like he promised? Did the tree survive? Did it bear fruit? We don't know. We don't know the end of the story; we only know the present.

I've been taught to have three points to make. Or at least to say that I have three points even if it is more. So, my three points are to have us engage in three questions: Where is our wilderness? What does the wilderness look like? And, what does God promise us in our wilderness?

The Wilderness

The where is the wilderness mentioned in these scripture passages is fairly easy to identify. [Psalm 63](#) is attributed to David during a time that he was in the physical desert and escaping from his enemies. The [Isaiah passage](#) that we read is after the many warnings that have been given about the upcoming Babylonian exile. The words need to be understood as words to people who are homeless, who have been exiled again, and do not know when they will be returning to a place that they can call home. Wilderness in the gospel lesson may be a period of dryness of "bearing no fruit". And the Corinthian passage references the Exodus.

What the wilderness looks like is also written. The Psalms, Isaiah and Corinthians mention it as a place that is without food and water. As Deborah reminded us in her class on Tuesday night, wilderness in Israel isn't like the wilderness here. Wilderness there is desert. Wilderness there is lack of water and lack of food. Wilderness isn't a place of chosen retreat,

no "lets go on a wilderness adventure, climb some ropes, walk among some trees, wade through a stream and at the end of the day go back to our tent and eat smores." The wilderness in the Scripture is a place where people's relationship to God is tested.

So, what does your wilderness look like? Where have you experienced the testing of your relationship with God? I chose to preach today because of my wilderness experience. I know that what I have to say next comes from near the end of the story, so forgive me for not being in the wilderness now.

Where have I experienced wilderness and what did it look like? The quilt hanging on the wall is a non-verbal expression of my wilderness. I struggle to put words around it.

Jeffrey and I have been life partners for nearly six years now. I wrestled with the "kids/no kids" issue for a number of years. Why raise a child in a world as screwed up as the news makes it? Why should I give up my freedom, my call, and my vocation to raise a child? Why do the "traditional" thing? And while I struggled with the issue on one level, there is plenty of the old traditional small-town Calvinist girl in me who had heard the old message that going out and making disciples for Jesus was done by having babies.

In September when I knew that I was pregnant, I wasn't surprised, and I wasn't upset. I knew that my life would change, but life is filled with change. Somehow things would work out. Of course, I kept quiet about it, as I knew that the risks of miscarriage in the first trimester are high. Jeffrey and I planned how we would inform our parents of the upcoming event.

My wilderness started with a premonition. I was in the dance class that Sheri led at the School of Christian Living. The exercise that we did one night was an authentic movement that was witnessed by our partner. Sheri was my partner for that

movement. And the movement that Sheri witnessed was of me cradling a baby and then putting it down and leaving it behind. Within a week of that movement, I miscarried.

Few people knew the grief that I felt. Few people knew the depth of the wilderness then, the lack of life, the dryness, and the longing for comfort. Because I had not been open about the pregnancy, how could I share about the miscarriage? Because people hadn't seen a physical change in me, how could I share my grief? At times, the wilderness for me was my own aloneness with my feelings about what had happened. But I couldn't keep the pain inside, I turned to members of this community to share the burden of grief: my mission group first, some people in the School of Christian Living, a gathering of women who made the baby quilt for Casey.

I also turned to the work of my hands as a way to work out my grief. I needed to make a quilt that represented where I was, what I was feeling, what I hoped. A way I could work through pain. This quilt was begun just a week after my miscarriage. I had planned to go in mid October to my parents to tell them the good news about the pregnancy and to spend time quilting with my mother and some other friends. I ended up going to Lynden and sharing my grief and I began to work on the quilt.

Who's to say that I might not have known something was changing in me. I had already sensed the need to work with the color combination here weeks before I even knew that I was pregnant. I had gathered the colors together. They waited for me to figure out what would be their source of inspiration. In my wilderness, I needed the soft rich colors of burgundy, wine, natural, brown, and green to soothe my spirit.

As many of you know, I spent a year of my life in Japan teaching conversational English as a missionary. I would consider that year as one of the most growing years for me, but it was also not one of the easiest. The year after I came back to the States was the hardest as I tried to make sense of

what I had done. As I stand near the end of the story on that wilderness time, I see that my sense of self, my sense of God, and my sense of color and art have been shaped by that time in Japan. It was only natural to turn to a Japanese-American, Kumiko Sudo, to find a pattern that would help me through this wilderness experience. I picked the pattern because the flowers reminded me of tears. Kumiko called the pattern Pomegranate. Yes, I know there are lots of connotations to women's fertility and that plant, but they are not stories that make up my life story.

I generally use a sewing machine to make [my quilts](#). For this one, I needed a lot more hands on time with it. I needed to take the extra time that handwork requires. I couldn't rush through my wilderness. The fabric flowers were made with a combination of sewing machine and mostly handwork. The manipulation of the fabric flowers was done by hand. The leaves and the stems were hand appliqued and embroidered. The quilting that you can readily see was done by hand. I pieced the blocks and top by machine and did some machine quilting on it.

"Seeds of Grief, Seeds of Growth" helped me to stay present to my wilderness. To work with my hands to give me the strength each day to survive my wilderness.

The experience of grief in the wilderness wasn't for the sake of only grief; I was grieving the loss of potential, the loss of life. There was an article in a *Faith at Work* magazine (Winter 1997) by Kent Borggaard that I would like to quote:

While working with and training a group of people who have experienced stillbirth or early infant death (so that they can be of support to others experiencing the same thing), one thing became apparent. Most people are very uncomfortable around anyone who has just experienced stillbirth...to the point where they are not able to be of support to those experiencing the grief. In their discomfort they often deny

it, ignore it, or make light of it; wanting them to "get on with living" as if it had not happened.

I wonder if it could be that we are uncomfortable, at least partly, because a stillbirth symbolizes for us the many "stillbirths" which happen in our own lives ... the times when there has been something growing within us, some developing talent or potential, some contribution to the work that could only come from (within) us, something conceived and growing in the uniqueness that is you/me. But some circumstance prevents the potential from ever being born; or, having been born, from growing and developing and becoming a part of what is. And we try to forget what might have been, and avoid things that might "symbolize" it and cause us to feel the grief of the loss.

Wilderness is a dry place, a place without potential. I think that there are Seekers who can recognize their own wilderness in this way.

God's Promise

Here I come upon what I consider to be some of the hardest parts of the scripture passage, especially the Corinthians and Isaiah pieces. Paul in his [letter to the Corinthians](#) says that God will give us the strength to endure the wilderness. But, in the [paragraph prior](#) there are plenty of examples of people who didn't endure. The Israelites who wandered around in the wilderness with Moses didn't actually get to the Promised Land, except for a few of them. The story of Israel is filled with examples of people who didn't make it out of their wilderness. So, how can we understand the promise of God giving us strength?

The [Isaiah passage](#) promises that God will satisfy our hungers. Come, buy without money, eat and drink your fill. Your soul will live. God will give you splendor. God will pardon and

have mercy. All of that sounds well and good, but then you get this little ringer, "My thoughts aren't your thoughts and my ways aren't your ways." I translate that as God saying, "Well, I promise you this but you just won't get it when I do it. You don't understand me and you might as well forget trying to "get it" as I just don't think the same way that you do." Not exactly a comforting thought in the end.

And even Jesus, in [explaining the deaths](#) of some Galileans in a couple of recent incidents seems to draw the same conclusion. The Galileans didn't die just because they were bad people. We just don't understand God's ways.

From what I have seen in my recent wilderness, God's promises are true. Somehow, through the day to day routine of working with my hands and needle, the wilderness became a place of peace. I would be tempted to say that God had nothing to do with the choice to make the quilt, which may be true, but indirectly God was there. God fed me in the wilderness, through the quiet daily habit of working with my grief and the quilt.

God also offered new things that could satisfy and ease my own pain. I already wrote in *Soundings* a little about this. After I came back from Washington State, I was approached at work about a possible job change. I definitely wasn't looking for a new job. Frankly, I was more interested in running the other way. I had only recently been in Child Care. I had just begun a major project. I'm not one to abandon something. The last time I made a job change I had done it after getting my work "in order" and doing as much capacity building there as I could. But I was encouraged to consider the offer. I have to hand it to God that the offer came initially without pressure and the offeror gave me as much time as I needed to consider it.

You might be wondering how I could view a job change as an answer to my wilderness. This was one of those times where,

yes, what God had in mind wasn't what I planned. At one level, just knowing that I was being courted was something that my wounded soul needed. The new job gave me hope. I was being offered a new way to influence the larger organization where I work, the Administration for Children and Families. A place to live into my fullest potential, to use and tax my skills and talents. I was given the birth of a new job to replace the stillbirth that I had survived.

I am not completely out of the wilderness. I still feel the pain at times. But I hang this quilt in my new office area and am reminded daily of ways that God can be present and give us strength to survive.

God has odd ways of helping us out of the wilderness. Sometimes God's strength for us is the presentation of a new option. Sometimes God may feed us and fill us with something that we didn't know we were hungry for. And sometimes, God may just be in the quiet day to day of the ordinary, that we can be grateful for another day of light and an evening of rest. This may be Jesus' answer of how God provides in the middle of our wilderness. God can be our caretaker: watering us, fertilizing us, nurturing us and watching over us until we are ready to live into our potential, to bear our figs and emerge from the wilderness.