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Wilderness: A Test
Matthew 4:1-11

Last week, I began a short sermon series on the idea of wilderness. I told a story about mountaineering and getting lost above treeline in whiteout conditions, which I enjoyed telling very much. While preaching the sermon, I realized something: half of the point of me doing this sermon series, I think, is so I can tell stories about me doing foolish things outdoors. I've already told these stories way too many times to my family, so it seems that now I'm going to inflict them on all of you.

What, you didn't think I was going to stop?

This next story comes via the summer right after I graduated college. During which some of my friends and I decided to bike across the country from New Hampshire to Vancouver, British Columbia. Most people think that the hardest part of this four-thousand mile trip on bike was going over the mountains, thousands of feet of elevation at a time, but that wasn't even close. Winner for hardest biking is easily the great highway wilderness of North Dakota.

Here's some perspective: we had a game we'd play to attempt to pass the many hours, called spot a tree. The entirety of the game was this: somebody would say "spot a tree," and to win, you had a full minute to find any tree in any direction and point it out. That's it.

Nobody ever won.

Imagine averaging between 80 and 150 miles a day on a bike for hours at a time, nothing to look at, with a steady headwind constantly pushing back on you, in the unshaded July sun.

There were days that, at some point, you started to think you couldn't go any further - although that was clearly not an option on the desolate roadsides. So I made a series of successive deals with myself. I'd look at my odometer and say, well, I can't imagine going another seventy miles, but I can do another ten miles, and then ten miles would go by and I'd say I could do another ten. Or maybe just a mile, and then another mile. Or on a hard day, I'd look ahead in the distance and say I can make it to that grain silo, and then another after that. On the hottest, longest days, by the end, it would just be one pedal stroke. And then one more. That was the deal.

Some of my other friends, those who found jobs in air conditioned offices, thought I was crazy to do this, and perhaps Jesus' friends thought he was a bit nuts to go walk out into the wilderness by himself to fast for a month and a half. Although to be clear, I stayed inside every evening, was well fed. But that's beside the point, because clearly Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and my bicycle adventure have little to do with each other, other than the fact that we were both hot, tired, and embarking on a little elective suffering.

Jesus' elective suffering seems to be a bit more purposeful than mine. Last week we talked about the idea that God sends people into the wilderness when it's time for a big change, and God does so, so that people know that if we're going to go where God is calling, we're going to do it with God's help and sustenance, and not by our own strength. And this scene comes at a moment of big change. In fact, Jesus hasn't even begun to teach or heal or minister in any way, and so God sends him out into the wilderness just like he did the Israelites coming out of Egypt.

This moment, though, exposes a bit of a problem that we have to deal with, and truth be told, I'm not sure that I'm all that excited to deal with it. It's the problem of pain. Pain because God sent his Son, who he loves, to nearly starve to death in the desert. I am not quite yet a parent, and yet already I can't even conceive of sending my child out into the desert without a convoy of air conditioned vehicles and a satellite phone to call for help at a moment's notice. Yet, God chooses to send Jesus into pain and suffering.

In spite of most human's aversion to seeking out pain and suffering, I would also venture to say that if there's any topic of universal concern, it's this. I can't imagine that there's anyone in the history of the world who hasn't suffered in one fashion or another. So universal is the problem of pain that there's a fancy theological term for this field of study - theodicy - and it's perhaps the single most fraught area of theology.

Let me give you a quick overview of the problem of pain from a theological perspective to see what we're up against here. First, let's say that pain is some sort of punishment. This intuitively makes sense in some ways - there are many realms that we correct bad behavior punitively, so perhaps God does the same thing. Except at least as often as not, we don't observe the correlation between suffering and some sort of perceived misstep. Apparently bad people enjoy great success and ease, and children not old enough to make a mistake of real consequence sometimes suffer terribly. The facts don't come anywhere near to corroborating this theory.

On the other pole, we could say that God has nothing to do with suffering. We suffer at the hands of one another, weather systems, and genetically flawed cells, and God has nothing to do with any of that. Of course, if you're an atheist, this works out perfectly, but in some ways only if you're an atheist. If you choose to believe in God, as I imagine most of us here do, you have to ask some questions about God's character, if God has nothing to do with human suffering and stands idly by. In this case, God seems in control of very little, which is an equally small comfort.

Then there's the "test" theory of suffering, the idea that life is a series of tests that need to be passed on the way to somewhere else, and if you've looked at the sermon title, you probably think this is where I'm going, but I think that even gets us back to square one. Even if it's a test, why are the tests doled out so unevenly, some tests seemingly utterly impossible, and some that we can handle with a bit of chutzpah and good luck?

But still, we get here, perhaps having rejected the easy answers to the problem of pain, and many of us think to ourselves that there's at least some merit in pain. I do. I think there was merit in biking across North Dakota, suffering a bit by choice, and learning something. Although I don't think it was some sort of test. I do think I learned a bit about perseverance, for example. In fact, I suspect you have at least a few stories of having learned something in a bit of your own personal wilderness.

In many ways, it seems our identities are wrapped up in our pain, for both good and for ill. They break us and strengthen us. When we look to discover what wisdom we've acquired, we often discover that pain is its font. The author James Baldwin once said that "people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are." He wrote this in a book called *The Fire Next Time*, a series of two essays published in 1963 reflecting on the Black experience in America. Baldwin wrote these words not in a vacuum, nor from the privilege of comfort, but in a world in which people who looked like him continued to be denied housing, healthcare, education, dignity, and even their very lives for just that fact. To be a person of color in 1960's America and to say that one needs to learn how to suffer is a radical claim about what it means to attempt to live and navigate this world.

Or maybe he was just saying that there wasn't any other option. And so in some practical sense, it may have to be enough to say that people suffer and that's just the way it is. The old reformers used to have clever theological language to talk about these unanswerable questions. They used to say that the ways of God are inscrutable to the minds of fallen mortals, that our sin has prevented us from understanding God whose thoughts and ways are higher than our own. But perhaps they were just saying the same thing. We don't know, and we don't know anybody who does know, and anybody who claims to have an easy answer is likely just trying to sell you something.

I think that's not a bad place to start. To at least begin by reckoning with the inevitability of suffering, and not think that through our theologizing we might have a shot at avoiding suffering. I'm not saying there aren't things we can't do to avoid needless suffering - pay your bills on time, stay as healthy as you can, maintain good relationships - but those things aren't theology exactly. There's no amount of negotiating we can do with God that seems to avoid that unpreventable pain, which takes off the table any theology that says if we pray harder or give more generously or join another church committee that it'll go away or at least be mitigated.

Perhaps that inevitability wasn't strictly true for one person. The most orthodox view on Jesus say that Jesus elected to suffer as a human, elected to be one of us, that he could have gotten off the cross, that he didn't have to go into the desert. At the risk of too much anthropomorphization, I wonder what it must have been like for God to look at the world in all its mess, the hurt that we inflict on one another needlessly, and to say yeah, I'm gonna get in on that. I'm going to become like one of them, get knocked around as a Palestinian peasant, and when they've had enough of me, they'll hang me on a cross.

It's patently absurd from any human point of view - what a strange thing to perceive the brokenness of all things and to go and participate in it knowing full well the consequences. But here's the thing: if God is going to send you and me out into the wilderness to change us, and if suffering is simply a part of the human experience, then I'm glad that God's been there too.

Christianity has largely resisted making sense out of suffering except for this one thing, that God has chosen to come and suffer with us, to be just as exhausted and bewildered and confused. If there's any way to lead us out of suffering, it evidently begins with God coming alongside right next to us. This is the very definition of compassion - it literally means suffering with.

On one of those days on that bike trip, one of my friends and I both found ourselves in that place in which neither of us thought we could keep going, so we made a deal. Instead of trading off who would lead and who would follow, we would ride next to one another. We would no longer get the benefit of having somebody else punch a hole in the wind half of the time, but we'd have a new benefit - we could look and see next to us somebody who was suffering alongside.

Now, having talked for this long about pain, it seems strange that I should do it. No, my life hasn't been immune to pain, certainly more than a long bike trip, but there are many more people in the world and in this room who are better acquainted with this particular wilderness. All the more reason, I say, to be grateful that Jesus has walked in our shoes and walks with us now.

I hope we can sense, in our moments of pain, that God has not abandoned us, that out there in the wilderness that sometimes looks like suffering, God has come alongside as well. And whoever we are to become through pain, I pray we become people who also come alongside others in pain not to solve it, but to remind one another that we are not alone in the wilderness. Amen.