

Lenten Stories: Who Are Your People?

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13

Margaret Renkl is a favorite *Times* columnist, writing at the intersection of faith and politics and culture, the voice of a woman of the South. I eagerly read everything she writes, and so it was with those eager eyes that I engaged her column of this past Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. Titled "The Meaning of Lent to This Unchurched Christian," Renkl recounted her disaffection with her Roman Catholic upbringing. Her solution was to continue to practice some of the rituals from her religious past, apart from any church, Catholic or otherwise. That felt OK to me as far as it went, and knowing there are many disaffected Roman Catholics, and disaffected Protestant Christians as well, I understand her journey.

But I wanted to say a whole bunch of things to her, which I mostly won't say this morning. There would be a baby and the bathwater conversation I would want to have, a hopefully not too over-the-top defensiveness that would encourage her not to equate her upbringing with every Christian experience, and my hope that she would find a community of faith to re-engage those important rituals, more than just a private experience. She even acknowledges, "I miss the community. I miss the singing. I miss serving in social justice ministries. I even miss the ashes."

Maybe she will come back to some church." She wonders as much: "I'll look for a new church someday, a new place to put all this sorrow and a new community with whom to share it, but I'm not obliged to find that place just now." Fair enough. People we know and love share that journey; perhaps we did, or do, as well, or our kids do.

But there was another, different point that equally caught my attention. In the middle of her column she confesses, with a touching honesty, what I believe many of us might confess, churched or not, what I often confess. "Honestly," she says, "I don't know what I'm looking for." I don't know what I am looking for. Perhaps that resonates with you. Like the words of that most outstanding U2 song; "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

Almost immediately following his baptism, “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days...”It’s important to note that while Lent is not inaugurated here, its rough outline is.

Note how much is going on in that one simple verse. Baptism, the Spirit doing the leading (not the devil, as we might presume), wilderness, temptation. It’s all there, and we have embraced some elements quite faithfully even as we have overdone it on others – the deprivation, the punishment, the sacrifice. It’s all there.

It’s worth looking at those temptations for a minute, to help remind us of who Jesus is and who he isn’t. He was not seeking religious power, nor political power. Remember that on Maundy Thursday, as he is betrayed. Remember that on Good Friday, as he is executed. He did not seek power, at least not power as we would understand it. Remember that when you encounter a portrayal of Jesus that is triumphant or muscular or some other thing.

Honestly, I don’t know what I am looking for. You may not understand yourself to be in a wilderness right now, but my hunch is that you know wilderness. The litany is familiar. Universal and particular. Health. Work. A relationship. Grief. Trauma. Your body or mind or spirit. Or any number of wildernesses we encounter in the headlines, the war in Ukraine not least among them. Jesus’ wilderness journey therefore becomes our baseline journey, and any of the physical or emotional or relational or spiritual wildernesses we journey through are echoes of that one, shadows, where in so many ways we become either tempted or famished or both.

“Who are your people?” It’s a phrase used in some cultures as a kind of introduction, to establish lineage with the ancestors, those who have gone before. Who are your people? It’s a good question to ask on an annual meeting day, to look back in order to look around that we may look ahead.

When we do that as a people of faith, we discover a great deal. We discover that we often answer the “our people” question with familiar themes. That is to say, Jesus’ Lenten journey is not our first journey, nor will it be our last. And the wilderness he encountered was not the first wilderness, nor will it be the last.

To frame his 40-day journey we've heard about the culmination of a 40-year journey, the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after being liberated from slavery in Egypt. At the end of that wilderness journey is the promise of land and people – interpretations of that promise remain in the news today.

Yet even with the promise, the wilderness journey and its impact abide. Even as the people prepare to enter the land flowing with milk and money, the ritual reminds them of their struggle. It reminds them of who they were even as they embrace who they are. Who are your people? "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..." Who we are is defined by wandering, defined by a journey.

Jennifer Moland-Kovash reminds us that "in the midst of their journey, (the Israelites) do not always believe that they will make it to the other side. They think it might be better to return to their lives of slavery. They do not always trust that God is with them." We are a people who wander, who journey, who experience wilderness. Never aimlessly, and never without purpose, and never without some ultimate destination in our hearts, but nonetheless...Who are your people? We are a wandering, wilderness people.

Isaac Villegas writes that "Lent is 40 days of wandering, like Israel in the wilderness, like Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Forty days of wandering, of circling back to ourselves to learn how to pay attention to our desires, to experiment with ways of listening to ourselves – to our souls, to our hearts, to our wants."

Barbara Chaapel writes that "We are a people on the way... As Lent begins, we enter the wilderness to again find our calling and learn how to follow."

You have heard me say many times, and I would continue to say it, that the practice of religion in America has made several fundamental errors – it has framed faith as an individual quest for personal salvation. Both are mistakes. If a 40-year wilderness wandering teaches us nothing else, it is that it's never about the individual, and always about the community. And while salvation is worth pondering, that is primarily up to God, and it takes our focus off the here and now, this present moment.

Debra Dean Murphy writes that “To enter the season of Lent is to walk through an open door...The good news,” she says, “is that we do not have to cross the threshold alone.”

We are a wandering people on a journey, a community of fellow travelers, each dealing with our own wilderness reality, but never alone. We are poor, wayfaring strangers, in that sense. We are pilgrims, in that sense, refugees, in that sense, who follow a pilgrim teacher, a teacher whose life began under refugee status and whose most triumphant, powerful moments were framed by sacrifice and suffering. That does not mean we wander without purpose, nor endure the wilderness for its own punitive sake. Remember that God provided manna for the journey, not unlike the communion bread we will share in a moment.

Moland-Kovash writes that “God is present, giving refuge, sustenance, and protection. We, like the Israelites, do not wander without the promises of God. We do not embark on this journey to live and trust and have faith without the assurance that the Spirit goes with us to lead us and guide us and lift us up when we need it.”

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you,” Augustine said centuries ago. That is what we are looking for, the end point for our wilderness journey, the destination of our wandering, resting on God.

T.S. Eliot famously wrote: ““We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.” (from “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets*)

Resting in God. The promised land. A place at the table. Home. Our true destination, and not ours alone, but those with whom we travel, and, more expansively, those who are unable to journey, for all the reasons we know. We take a step today. Maybe a first step. Maybe a next step. But a step, through the open door. A cause for celebration, a cause for gratitude, and a cause for hope. Amen.