

Rev. Zach Moffatt
Adams UMC
4th Sunday in Lent
March 22nd, 2020

Worship in the Wilderness

Psalm 95

Focus: How do we worship in times like these?

Function: The function of this sermon is worship the God whose love heals and makes all things new.

Will you pray with me and for me: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, we are your people and we know you are with us as we journey through this wilderness. Remind us of your eternal presence and love which never fail. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable and pleasing in thy sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Speak, Lord Jesus, for your servants are listening.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.

The traditional image for the season of Lent is the image of the wilderness. Typically, the lectionary reading for the first Sunday in Lent is one of the stories of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness either told by Matthew, Mark, or Luke. It's that story where Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and is tempted for 40 days and 40 nights. And, there are many allusions that link this story of the liturgical season of Lent. Lent is 40 days, not counting Sundays. Lent is the season of repentance—where we typically give something up and take on a spiritual discipline. It is a season of voluntary wilderness. We follow Jesus into the wilderness so we may, hopefully, be drawn deeper in our relationship with Christ as we fast and take on a spiritual discipline so that we are able to rejoice all the more when we celebrate the Easter feast and hear the news of Christ's triumph over death once more.

But there are also instances in life where we enter the wilderness not voluntarily, but it seems that we are thrust or thrown there. There are moments in life where the wilderness seemingly encroaches into our lives and knocks on our front door and says, "I'm here." And, I think it is safe to say that, for many of us, we are experiencing that right now. With the threat of Covid-19 forcing many of us to limit our social interactions the feelings of isolation, despair, fear, and depression can sink in. When we are limited from talking to our loved ones because they are in the hospital or the nursing home, when our friends and family who have compromised immune systems can't be hugged, when many of us worry about our employment status because our work places are closing the wilderness is seemingly upon us. And, when the one place where we feel like we need to gather to feel community, the church, also closes its doors and we can no longer worship in physical community, this social distancing can easily turn into social isolation and we begin to feel all the more that the wilderness is certainly amongst us.

All of this, at least for me, begs to ask the question—how do we worship in times like these? Why worship when we are in the wilderness—or better put—when the wilderness finds us? What does worship look like when we are alone and it seems like the world is falling apart? How can we sing the songs of praise we love when we are alone? What does worship in the wilderness look like? Well, Psalm 95 reminds us the power of worship—and even reminds us that worship is so much more than just something that takes place in our buildings on Sunday mornings.

On the surface, it may seem like Psalm 95 is kind of a rough, unpastoral Psalm—especially once we get to the end. It ends abruptly and kind of harsh. **But, when we dig deeper we can see that Psalm 95 is a treatise, almost, on why we worship by asking the powerful question, “Is the Lord with us?”** This powerful question is one that has been asked since time began. It was asked by Adam and Eve in the garden. It was asked by Noah and his family. It was asked by Abraham and Sarah. It was asked by Hagar and Ishmael. It was asked by the Hebrew people while they were in bondage and even when they were freed and heading toward the promised land. It was asked by countless psalmists—making up at least half the psalms. It was asked by Mary and Joseph. It was asked by Jesus himself as he hung upon the cross. I would also venture to say that it has been asked you, and I know it has been asked by me, a time or two. But the powerful thing is, is that every time this question is asked God always answers with the same answer...yes.

Psalm 95 reminds us that worship is not just about the songs we sing—but worship is a state of being. Worship is not just an hour on Sunday morning where we sing 3 hymns, say a few prayers, give a few dollars, and hear a sermon. Worship is embodied—meant to be lived out in the world, shared with others, and fill the soul. Why? Because of who God is and what God has done. The creator of the universe is the one who made us. The One who made us is the one who loved us. The one who loved us is the one who loves us even when forget he is with us, even when we go against his will, even when we buy into the lies that we are not enough and ignore his love. As verse 6 and 7 remind us—we are God’s and because we are God’s...because of God’s love let us bow down and praise his holy name.

Even in the wilderness. Even in the hardship. Even in the pain. Even in the isolation. Even in the shame. Even despite our sin. Even in exile. Even on the mountain. Even in the valley. We praise God. We praise God because Psalm 95 reminds us that God reigns over all. God reigns and therefore love reigns. God reigns and therefore compassion reigns. God reigns and therefore mercy reigns. God reigns and therefore redemption reigns. God reigns and therefore hope reigns. God reigns and therefore fear, hatred, panic, and isolation are no longer do. God reigns and therefore life, healing, and peace reign...forever and ever. Even in the wilderness.

While during this wilderness season we may not be able to praise God together in person—we can each live into the true meaning of worship. Worship is embodied. It is meant to be lived out in our world. We worship when we pray with and for one another. We worship when we sing praises in our homes. We worship when we check on our neighbors. We worhsp

when we serve the vulnerable amongst us. We worship when we continue to feed the hungry. We worship every time we heal the sick, visit the forgotten, and love the person in our very presence. And know that when we fail, when we mess up, when we fall, when we fall back to the old habits of shame and fear—God still whispers in our ears, “I’m still with you. I still love you. I am still on the throne. And, I will never stop loving you.” This is why we worship. Worship in the wilderness may seem like an oxymoron. Worship in the wilderness may seem weird or forced. But, when we remember that God is always with us and the sea and lands and mountains are his—and the one who brought those into existence breathes new life into our souls, breathes hope into our spirits, and calls us his own. How do we worship in times like these? We worship every single time we reflect on the mercy, presence, and light of God—even when we are in the wilderness.

Come, let us sing out loud to the Lord! Let’s raise a joyful shout to the rock of our salvation! Come, let’s worship and bow down! Let’s kneel before the Lord, our maker! He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep in his hands. Amen.