

Our Sunday school children will be looking at the Noah's Ark stories in the Bible today as we look at our wilderness theme. While time on a boat may sound more like a cruise than the wilderness, let's put ourselves in the situation of the people in those stories. There's water everywhere and no dry land. Who knows how long the flooding will last? How long will we be floating? Will the food supply last? What happens if someone is injured? And if the water ever does go down again, there's nothing left. No friends, no family, no neighborhoods. No support system. Just the last people on earth. They have the deed to everything, which might as well be nothing. If they only have two cows on board it's going to be a long time before they sit down to a nice steak dinner again!

It would be hours and hours and hours of boredom and monotony. The only thing they had to do is to worry about the future. No, Noah's Ark was no cruise ship. They were in the middle of a wilderness of destruction and they didn't know what the future would hold for them. Let's not jump to the rainbow at the end of the story too fast.

I think most adults have at one point or another found themselves in a wilderness-like situation. Maybe it was truly being lost with no resources and lots of threats. Those who have combat experience know such things. Or maybe it was in the middle of civilization but there was no help to be had and no hope for the future. Times like this are dark and frightening. When you are in the midst of them they are all consuming.

I think of what Jill Pow and her family have been experiencing for the last few months. She has known since the viral attack on her heart some 12 years ago that something like this could end up happening. As she entered the hospital in June the heart teams told her they were in uncharted territory. Her case was complicated. There were no good options; only speculation about what known procedures might be able to do. Based on that knowledge they made what they hoped were the right decisions. Of course nothing has worked. Jill and her family live in a wilderness-like time right now. Powerless to get out of the current situation, yet no hope for the future.

We read the story of Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism. The Bible doesn't tell us much about it. What did he know and what didn't he know? It appears as if Jesus didn't know how long he was to stay in the wilderness and he didn't know what he would be facing.

When you are in a wilderness time in life, and you may be in one right now, you just don't know how long it will last and how life will be when you come out of it. The jobless wonder how long it will be until they get another job. Those who are fighting custody battles with their ex-spouses don't know what will come next. Those who are depressed don't know when or if they will ever feel good again. Those who are facing civil or criminal lawsuits don't know how it will turn out. All you know is that it will be different - or at the very least you will be different.

The Bible uses wilderness imagery often for it is a part of a life of faith. Those who think that faith makes life easier are kidding themselves. The people of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Similarly the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians led to decades of

exile. On and on it goes, as individuals and as a nation they have times of severe adversity that appears to extend indefinitely. Each time though, they somehow come out of it, and they are different.

There is the saying that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I disagree. Adversity may make you stronger, but not always. Sometimes it makes you weaker. Often it teaches you that you aren't as strong and capable as you thought you were.

I believe that as a society we are in a wilderness time right now. We have no national direction, no grand plan for the future. I look at my cell phone and I marvel at those who manufacture them. Trends and desires from mobile devices change so fast that I don't see how the manufacturers do it. It takes years to develop a new product. They have to guess what people's desires will be a year or two out and hope they guess it right. If you guess right you're okay - for now. But you'd better have the next generation product well on its way, and it better be a right guess too. If you guess wrong - well, Blackberry teaches us a lesson, and plenty of others. It seems

like every day another bastion of corporate stability finds itself on the rocks.

While we are an exceedingly wealthy nation we live in a wilderness of instability. Jobs, markets, organizations and just about everything people once thought were permanent turn out not to be.

When some of my colleagues struggle with declining numbers in churches and facing closure I say that our whole society is in a state of flux. No one has a solid anchor and no one knows how it will end. All we can say is that when it does end we will be different. A wilderness changes you because you can never undo the experience.

When you are in a wilderness time in life you want to get it over with as soon as possible. I'm not going to suggest otherwise, but know that sometimes a wilderness can go on for a long long time. At those times God seems distant. God doesn't seem to care about your plight. God is silent and unanswering. You can feel like the whole world is bearing down upon you and you are left alone with the burden.

I don't know why God works the way God does at times. We call to God for help and want it to come, yet it doesn't seem to. There's no lightening of the burden. Things don't get easier. The wilderness seems to go on forever.

Rather than rescuing us from the problems, God comes to be with us in the problems. The cross of Jesus shows you just how far God will go to find you. But remember, Jesus still dies. He doesn't get a sudden rescue.

I suppose that's support greater than a rescue. What we want is to have our problems solved. What we get is God-with-us in our problems, and God's promise for the future. St. Paul wrote in our second reading that he felt the sufferings of this present age are insignificant compared to the glory God has in store. That's a great thought, and note that there is no promise of relief in this age.

You know I do not like to preach that God has a plan for us when we are in a wilderness and God is preparing us for something greater. That's a nice sentiment, but too often it doesn't hold true. It shatters faith and makes people feel even worse when there is no hope. No, the wildernesses of life are

real and they are dangerous and they are stronger than we are,  
and sometimes we lose. We just aren't strong enough.

No matter how vast the wilderness and how forbidding it may  
be God will meet us there. God is afraid of nothing. There is  
no place God won't go. And our words become the words of the  
hymn we sang as our psalm:

Come, O Christ, among the ashes  
come to wipe our tears away,  
death destroy and sorrow banish;

Now and always, come and stay.

In a wilderness God is with us, holding us into a greater  
eternity. Amen