

“God is Already Here”

Psalm 139:7-12

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What do you think of when you hear the word, “wilderness?”

For many of us, the idea of wilderness evokes images of nature: places full of trees, plants, fresh air, and wildlife. But unlike manicured parks with paved walking paths and planned flower gardens, wilderness is the earth in its natural state—untamed, and largely untouched by human hands. And that’s why the wilderness is often a place of unknown.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 describes wilderness as a place where the earth and its community of life are “untrammeled by man.” In other words, a place that remains largely untouched by humanity. The purpose of this legislation was to preserve these wild places because they hold historical, scientific, ecological, and educational value.

For those who travel into wilderness areas, the experience can be awe-inspiring and life changing. Real wilderness experiences have inspired countless stories. Books like *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *Hatchet* tell of people venturing beyond what is familiar and finding themselves in places of uncertainty, challenge, and discovery.

And what these stories often reveal is that wilderness isn't simply about the setting. There are obstacles encountered beyond the natural elements. Wilderness challenges us. It changes us.

The truth is that many of the wildernesses we encounter have nothing to do with nature. Wilderness can arise anytime we step beyond what is familiar and controlled. Times when we are navigating territory we have never traveled before. Wilderness is experienced in transitions, losses, and new experiences.

Some wilderness experiences are large and life-altering: leaving a beloved home, going off to school, adjusting to a diagnosis for yourself or a loved one, the loss of a job, a spouse, or a child, or the ending of an important relationship.

Others may not carry the same weight, but they can still leave us feeling uncertain and off balance: moving to a new town, starting at a new school, trying a new sport or hobby, attending a protest or school board meeting...anything where we find ourselves in a situation where we don't quite know what we're doing.

Sometimes we enter the wilderness because an experience shakes a foundational understanding we have carried for years. Other times, we may not even be able to identify what brought us there. We only know that the familiar landmarks are gone, and we are traveling a path we have not traveled before.

And just as one often finds beauty and danger in nature, there is beauty and danger in these wilderness moments too. Because part of being in the wilderness is that it is a time of challenge, change, and uncertainty. We may feel lost. We may question things we once thought we understood. And in these seasons of wilderness, there may also be moments of wonder and insight, of learning and discovery. Sometimes we see things about ourselves, about others, or about God that we could not see before.

I think it's important to know that this doesn't mean that hardship happens because God wants to teach us something. Because sometimes wilderness is just wilderness. Sometimes difficult things happen because difficult things happen. There is not a lesson hidden inside every painful experience. Ours is not a God who causes suffering so that we can learn something from it.

In the Bible, there are many wilderness stories. Times when people find themselves in places of uncertainty, vulnerability, and dependence. And there is a common thread that connects all these stories; God is with them.

In Exodus, we hear the story of the Israelites escaping slavery in Egypt and making their way toward freedom. They took the long way, the very long way. They find themselves wandering ... for forty years. It was a time of discovery and trial, because the wilderness can be harsh. There were moments of fear, frustration, uncertainty, and even conflict. And yet, one day at a time, God provided for them. And God never left Israel's side.

Jesus' wilderness experience in the Gospels echoed the ancient story of the Israelites. Forty days and forty nights Jesus was in the desert, no food, facing all the elements, being tempted. There, Jesus relied on his connection to God to survive.

Perhaps one of the hardest things about wilderness is that we don't want to go through it alone.

Children often reach a stage where they want someone to go with them whenever they try something new.

"Come with me." "Will you come with me?" "Can you stay with me?"

As adults, we don't really outgrow that desire. We still call someone on a long drive. We still ask a friend to accompany us somewhere unfamiliar. Sometimes the destination isn't really the point. We just don't want to be alone.

And perhaps that is why one of the hardest parts of wilderness is how lonely it can feel. Even when people surround us, we can feel isolated in our grief, uncertainty, questions, or fears.

And that raises an important question: Where is God when life feels uncertain? The answer offered by Psalm 139 is simple: God is with us.

To emphasize this point, the psalmist describes the boundaries of geography and experience, of life and death, of light and darkness.

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"

The answer is nowhere. Because no matter where we go, no matter what we face, God's presence is one thing we can be assured of. Nothing we go through is outside of God's care.

Hear this again: There is nowhere we can go and nothing we can experience that is beyond the reach of God's love.

In the children's classic, *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown, a little bunny tells his mother that he plans to run away. As he describes the different ways and places he might escape to, his mother responds by describing all the ways she would still be there.

If the little bunny becomes a fish in a stream, the mama bunny will become a fisherman and fish for him. If he becomes a bird, she will become a tree for him to land in. If he becomes a little boy, she will become the loving presence waiting for him at home.

Finally, the little bunny gives up and says, "Shucks. I might just as well stay here and be your little bunny."

To which his mother replies, "Have a carrot."

Likewise, there is nowhere we can go to escape God.

Just as love drives many parents to extraordinary lengths for their children, God's love for us is the gift of God's presence with us at all times and in all things.

Life will have wilderness moments and seasons.

There will be times when the path is clear and familiar,
and times when we find ourselves wandering through unknown territory.

There will be moments of beauty and moments of danger.
Moments of discovery and moments when we feel lost.

The promise of Psalm 139 is not that we will avoid the wilderness.
The promise is that we never enter it alone.

Wherever we are, God is already here.
Wherever we have been, God was already there.
And wherever we will go, God is already there too.

Amen.