

*Where Are You?*

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*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*February 26, 2023, First Sunday in Lent*

*Psalms 91; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this First Sunday in Lent. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Two wilderness journeys serve as metaphors for Lent: the forty days Jesus spent being tempted and tried and the forty years Moses and the children of Israel wandered lost.

A Lenten spiritual says, “We must walk this lonesome valley, we have to walk it by ourselves.” But another one says, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.” We may have to walk a lonesome valley, but Jesus walks with us, and we walk together as a people, even when we feel alone.

We need each other in a wilderness or dark night. So if you are in a lost or lonely place this Lent, please be sure to linger after the service and appreciate these others who are walking with you, both in person and online, and know that it helps them that you are here.

And if you are not in a Lenten place, but are full of light, then please be sure to linger after the service to extend your care and support to the people around you, especially those you do not know or those you know are having a hard time.

**Call to Worship—** Lent recalls Jesus in the wilderness and also in his last days journeying toward the cross and the light of Easter dawn. Lent is about our own journey toward Easter—preparing ourselves to die to our fearful, self-concerned self and be resurrected closer to our true loving, Spirit-filled self. Lent prepares us as the wilderness prepared Jesus to emerge full of the Spirit’s power for serving and changing the world.

It is crucial to understand that we go through Lent for the sake of all creation. Lent calls us to trust that no matter what situation we face, every moment of every day, the best thing we can possibly do is let go of everything else and turn first to God or our higher power, and then think and act in that Spirit-focused mode of being. That is what the world most needs from us today, and what Lent trains us to do.

Let us worship together, taking these first steps on our Lenten journey...

**Children’s Time**— Good morning! I’ve been talking lately about the wise book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. It points out how the Garden of Eden creation story that Europeans brought to North America led to the idea that humans are not a part of the natural world, but in opposition to it, allowing them to abuse creatures, the earth or even people they considered less human than themselves.

On the other hand, the indigenous creation stories native to North America led humans to see themselves as part of nature, and as brothers and sisters with all other creatures and the earth, and they tried to live in respectful harmony with care for all.

Yet the Garden of Eden creation story has indigenous roots as well. What if the problem is not the story, but how we interpret it? Maybe we can read it in a way that aligns with scientific understanding and spiritual wisdom about how we need to live in order to help the earth be a safe, stable home for all.

The story says that God created man and woman in God’s image, meaning that God is not binary, God contains both man and woman and every gradation of human gender and sexual orientation—they are all in God’s image, and holy.

The Creator took the first humans and put them in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Our role is to work with the earth in such a way that we keep it sustainably healthy.

The Creator God commanded the first humans, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” This shows that we are free but always within limits, and it shows that our innocent human spirit dies when we start judging instead of relating in a nonjudgmental way.

Temptation arises in the story in the form of a serpent who stirs harmful desires and changes the way the humans look at their place in the world, and sure enough, as they start feeling discontent and judging they lose their simple relationship to their bodies and to the earth and to God, and the result is a sense of separation, wrongness and shame.

Today’s part of the story ends with tremendous sadness: The humans hear their beloved friend, the Creator, walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hide themselves from the Creator’s presence. The last thing we hear is God calling out, “Where are you?”

The story goes on to say that humans were thrown out of Eden, but the wisest teachers in our tradition, including Jesus, believe there is a way to get back to that indigenous relationship to nature, and that is to become like a little child, to be simply and mindfully present and not judge, and to love God and all our neighbors, meaning all people, even enemies, and all creatures and all the earth.

We need to walk as if we are in the presence of the Creator of the universe every step of the way, and if we step off that sacred way, we need to hear God calling, “Where are you?” Or if we get lost, we need to call to God, “Where are you?” So it is very important that we learn how to listen for God and how to call to God, and we do that through a tool we can use every step of every day... Prayer! Let us say together the Lord’s Prayer...

### ***Where Are You?***

Imagine God’s delight in the Garden of Eden. Imagine God as the creative Spirit that sparked the Big Bang and taught the scattered debris the laws of love that brought dust and gas together to form stars and communities of galaxies. Imagine God traveling over the whole universe, past planets freezing and barren or overheated and choked with acid clouds.

Imagine how lonely God would feel until at last this tiny blue green earth comes into view where the life the Spirit set in motion flourishes and consciousness evolves, where there are creatures who recognize and love God’s presence. Imagine how God would feel in the slanting golden light and warm evening breeze in the Garden of Eden, walking together with the first two humans in peaceful, quiet gladness, sharing the wonder and beauty of it all.

And then imagine the day when God arrived and found the humans missing, and saw the apple core in the grass at the foot of the tree and the serpent slinking away with an evil grin. Imagine how God’s heart would break. Can you hear the longing in God’s voice calling out, “Where are you?”

And just imagine how God is feeling today to see what humanity’s selfishness, violence and greed have done to this beloved earth. “Where are you? What were you thinking?”

Martin Smith’s classic book of Lenten readings, *A Season for the Spirit*, says that the Holy Spirit wants to drive us into the wilderness as much as it did Jesus, and part of the reason is to get us to face our truth.

A few days into Lent the daily reading in Smith's book is entitled, "The Anesthetic Begins to Wear Off." It does not always feel good to acknowledge the truth, so we self-medicate with the anesthetics of distraction, avoidance and denial, but this time in the church year and this time in history both demand we have the courage to confront the truth and let the Spirit help us evolve to meet it. We can trust that the Spirit will bring us through our wildernesses transformed as Jesus was, with gifts to help create the conditions for abundant, joyous life.

That is Lent's purpose, to help us create the realm of God on earth, the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land, a feast where all are met with compassion and served with love. So how can we work with the Spirit to get there?

The first step is to ask the Spirit the same question that God asked Adam and Eve: where are you? The Spirit is a living power, it is all around and within us every second of our lives. If we are not experiencing its comfort, guidance and power, it may be because we are not asking it, "where are you now," as we take each step through the constantly shifting sands of our lives.

Thomas Merton wrote in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "The [person]...who lets God lead...through the wilderness, and desires no other support or guidance than that of pure faith and trust in God alone, will be brought to the Promised Land... [and] taste the peace and joy of union with God." (p 239, Chapter 32 "The Night of the Senses")

Merton tells us to be "heroically faithful." (p 243) If we can be patient and humble and keep calling back to God, "Where are you?" when the Spirit feels absent, we can develop another kind of sense to guide us through any crisis. Spiritual intuition comes when we are still, and trusting in God, and patiently listening for God's voice. (p 237)

The Episcopal priest and teacher of Centering Prayer, Cynthia Bourgeault, wrote a book called *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*. In it she says that surrender, in the sense of entrusting oneself to God, opens the heart to the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit. Bourgeault says, "That person becomes a powerful servant of humanity...whose very being radiates blessing and spiritual strength."

This is the best way through any kind of wilderness. The title character of the book, *Becoming Nicole*, had no problem entrusting herself to the Spirit within her from when she was tiny. She knew she was a girl in a boy's body.

Her parents had a much harder time letting go of inherited expectations and cultural norms. The most dramatic story that runs through the book is of Nicole's parents becoming heroically faithful, and trusting, and in the end emerging from their wilderness as powerful servants of humanity.

Imagine their struggle, though, as conservative Republicans who had never heard of transgender and probably wouldn't have approved of it if they had. Imagine them giving their five year old boy action figures as a present and seeing him become depressed because all he wanted was girl dolls, and he hated being treated like a boy. Imagine how they felt when another conservative Republican in town pushed his grandson to harass and bully their child in fifth grade just because she was born a girl in a boy's body.

Cynthia Bourgeault says that in any situation we can find ourselves responding inwardly in one of two ways. Either we will brace, harden and resist, or we will soften, open and surrender. If we train ourselves to keep opening to God no matter what, we will remain in alignment with our innermost being, and through it will come the guidance and power of the Spirit. Bourgeault teaches, "Bracing is never worth the cost." "Never let anything knock you out of presence." (Wisdom Way of Knowing, p 73ff)

The book *Becoming Nicole* shows her parents responding in both ways, first bracing and escaping to be anything but present, but then increasingly surrendering and being fully open to the Spirit. The book shows clearly the different consequences of those two paths, suffering coming from one and meaning and joy coming from the other.

Jesus was vulnerable after forty days of fasting in the wilderness. He was in danger of bracing, of being knocked out of presence, of giving in to selfish temptations, but instead of asking where material comfort and security were, he asked where God was. As a result, his inner turmoil passed and left him in peace, and angels came and waited on him, and he came out of that wilderness filled with the Spirit.

This practice of being present to the Spirit can transform our suffering, it can reveal the Garden of Eden within the most dangerous wilderness, it can open our vision to the light that shines in the darkness, it can lead us through Lent and Good Friday to Easter dawn. The Spirit is here, eager to comfort, guide and empower you, whatever situation you face. The Spirit is here,

ready to transform you so that you can transform the world around you. The Spirit is here.  
Where are you? Let us pray in silence....

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

Footprints in the snow.  
A visitor in the night.  
We don't live alone.

**God, This Wilderness Seems Trackless**

tune: Wachet Auf (PH#108) 8.9.8.8.9.8.6.6.4.8.8.

Texts: Psalm 25:1-10; Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13

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God, this wilderness seems trackless,  
Dark night of soul a starless blackness.  
Wounds, wrongs and losses tempt despair.  
All my stumbling steps betray doubt.  
My flailing mind can find no way out.  
At last I fall to humble prayer.  
I quiet as I wait.  
The swirling sands abate.  
Faith, courage, love:  
Like stars they rise. Light fills my eyes.  
Christ shows the way, his truth makes wise.

Holy Spirit drives and leads me,  
It teaches me, its angel feeds me  
If I give God my will's control.  
Then when demons come attacking  
And tempt with all that I feel lacking,  
I turn to God and lift my soul.  
Christ takes my outstretched hand.  
He, too, has walked this sand.  
He leads me through.  
Strength to endure, faith's steps made sure:  
God's steadfast love holds me secure.

Spirit leads to confrontation  
With foes of soul and of Creation.  
Christ leads us out to serve all earth.  
Wilderness is our preparing  
For paths of loving, healing, caring.  
Dark nights of soul are throes of birth.  
We reach the other side  
Stripped of self-will and pride.  
We rise, all God's.  
We follow on where Christ has gone  
Down paths that lead to Easter dawn.