

## Thriving in the Wilderness

*Jesus said, "It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only him".*

In 1968 I completed my 13<sup>th</sup> year of life—don't laugh, I know I just gave away my age.

My knowledge of the world outside my family nucleus during the 1960s was pretty much non-existent. I was 8 when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated but other than that, I had no idea what was happening. From 1963 to 1967 my family was in disarray and I ended up attending 6 different elementary schools. So it may be a little understandable that I was not focused on the tensions around this country or in the wider world. Whether I knew it or not, the world outside my family was in just as much turmoil.

Recounting, not from memory but from historical records, the highlights of the tensions and conflicts during the 60s there was: the Cold War which was played out through a conflict between North and South Viet Nam, the protests that sometimes turned violent on college campuses in the U.S., France, and Germany, the Civil Rights Movement which also had its eruptions of violence, and the assassinations of 4 prominent—even beloved men in America. The 1960s were fraught with unrest as personal freedoms and rights versus restrictive and divisive laws were being challenged in the U.S. as well as the rule of dictators around the world. One could say that my family and the outside world were in a metaphorical wilderness.

Recently one of the protest songs from that era was played on the radio and it just struck me. It was released in 1968 at what might be considered the height of the unrest.

I am going to give you just a few lines and most of you will know the tune.

*<sup>1</sup>You say you want a Revolution, well you know, we all wanna change the world...*

*But when you talk about destruction don't you know that you can count me out...*

*You say you got a real solution; well you know we'd all love to see the plan*

*You ask me for a contribution, well you know, we are doing what we can,*

*But if you want money for people with minds that hate, all I can tell you is brother you have to wait,*

There were many protest songs in this wilderness time in the world of the 1960s but when this one was released it was actually not that well received by protestors. Why? Because it suggested that violence and hate were not the way to find resolution to the issues facing the world—and particularly the U.S.

Listening to this song the other day I thought so much about the wilderness our world today is experiencing and I thought, thank you John Lenon. Thank you John Lenon because the backdrop to hearing that song was our Gospel reading from Luke today also playing in my head.

The Gospel of Luke tells the true story of the non-violent person God sent to show a different way of dealing with life under the oppression of Roman rulership and the misrepresentation of the love and generosity of God by the Jewish religious leaders.

In our text for this morning Jesus is about to embark on a life journey that will lead him to the most violent yet non-violent act of love; but first,

Jesus was “in the wilderness”. What does the term “wilderness” in this scripture conjure up for you? For me it is a place of discomfort, uncertainty and disorientation; a place of loneliness where fear and worry are the main emotions.

Jesus is led in that place by the Spirit, and, interestingly, it appears he goes willingly. I want to make two notes here: 1) Notice that Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness—not dumped, not left—but led. He was not alone. 2) I have no idea what Jesus was thinking but I have no doubt that his devotion and faith in God was, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christian church in Rome, <sup>2</sup>“near...on his lips...and in his heart”. Therefore, he was undoubtedly prepared for whatever was to happen as he lived and traveled for 40 days in and through that place. It is not until the end that he is tempted—when he was supposedly at his weakest and therefore most likely to give in. It is then that he is offered (the) authority over all the kingdoms of the world. And all he had to do is deny God by giving his worship to the “devil”, the tempter. Jesus gives us the reason he is able to reject the temptations, “One does not live by bread alone”. Jesus had fortified himself with the most important sustenance—the word of God.

And this same “bread” would see him through his entire mission to its completion. What did Jesus do next? Still led by the Spirit he began to teach in his home region, Galilee about the love of God and how that love sustains and heals. He had grown up seeing the oppression under the Roman government. He had grown up watching the Jewish religious leaders gain power and wealth by cheating and giving in to the very temptations he had rejected in the wilderness. As an adult what would he do to try to alleviate the suffering of the people? He said, “give your coat to one who has none, feed the person who is hungry, shelter the person who has no shelter.” He told his followers, “you give them something to eat”. Grassroots organizing.

The people of the 1st century dealt with governmental abuse, wealth inequality, poor nutrition, homelessness and many of the same issues we deal with in our time. But the same holds true for us as it did for the 1st century Christians and Christians in the 1960s.

Last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, Fr. Rob spoke of the ways we prepare, fortify, and sustain ourselves and those around us, our family, our friends, and those in our wider community. He said, <sup>3</sup>“here at St. Barnabas we like to use the season of Lent to focus on spiritual practices, practices that draw us closer to God, others, and self.”

This was how Jesus was sustained as he traversed the wilderness and his journey to the Cross. He kept his relationship with God at the front of his life, always making time for private and public prayer—giving God glory and honor as the life giver and sustainer of all that is. He lived love, showed love, and died for love—never raising a hand in violence—rather always reaching out with a healing touch.

Rev. Susan Arnold  
March 9, 2025

His wilderness experience as related by Luke is our example of how to deal with the angst we feel in our own wildernesses whether private, family, community or wider. We fill ourselves, our minds and bodies, with the good and faithful word of God through prayer, and sharing of worship, building one another up and then sharing our resources with those in need. We become the ongoing grassroots organization Jesus began.

There are so many opportunities for us, here at St. Barnabas and members of this 5 cities community to share the love of God in Christ Jesus as Tricia read earlier from Paul's letter to the Romans. Showing our gratitude as Moses instructed the Israelites. And as John Lenon said in his song, *we all want to change the world, but destruction and hate, count me out.* In truth it is as Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

1 John Lenon, 1968, Revolution

2 Romans 10:8b

3 Rev. Rob Keim, March 5, 2025 homily, May I have your Attention