

Making the Road: *Walking through Lent*

WEEK 2: WALKING IN THE WILDERNESS

written by TERI MCDOWELL OTT

Sunday, March 13 ☞ Luke 4:1-13

The wilderness is a place every Christian knows. It's not a physical place like the dry, desolate desert where we imagine the Spirit leading Jesus. Our wilderness creeps into our everyday lives, taking up residence in our mind, our mood, our soul. The wilderness is a spiritually dry space, devoid of inspiration. It takes all our effort to survive and thrive in the wilderness where we are tempted to stray from Christ's path at every turn.

Maybe the wilderness crept into your life during our long period of pandemic isolation. Maybe you attended worship with your community via video or Zoom at first but grew dissatisfied with all things virtual. It was easy to ignore your church's worship, to power down your community's connection.

So much has been revealed through this pandemic. We learned more about each other than perhaps we ever wanted or was good for us to know. The behavior of some in my community has angered and irritated me. Stones have been thrown in every direction. We've witnessed and been tempted by greed, self-righteousness, and a flagrant disregard for neighbor and stranger. An evil disease has wreaked havoc on our lives — disorienting, tempting, and corrupting.

This Lent is our chance to spiritually reboot. As we make this road with Jesus, we follow the One who was tempted as we are tempted. Jesus willingly followed the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by power, greed and glory. Jesus knows where we are and he knows the way out. This is the good news. We don't have to make this road alone. We have an experienced spiritual guide. Jesus made it through. With his help, we can too.

God of grace, the wilderness is a frightening, disorienting place where we risk losing ourselves and our way. As we make this road through Lent, guide and direct us. Keep our eyes fixed on Christ, who was tempted as we are tempted yet without sin. Thank you for staying by our side. Amen.

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Monday, March 14 ☩ Exodus 13:17-18

I volunteer in a men's prison where men have told me that, growing up, they had to choose between "the best of bad options." The wilderness was the Israelites' escape, but 40 years of perilous, exhausting wandering can be its own form of slavery. Who in your life or your community is living with limited options? The dad sacrificing time with his kids because he works three jobs to keep them fed. The domestic abuse victim fleeing to protect herself who loses her financial support. The parents who hospitalize their adult son to help his addiction. God does not abandon us in the wilderness. God guides us even in our worst circumstances.

God of mercy, you are with us as a guide and support. Help us to be here for each other, recognizing the difficult and perilous journey some have no other option but to take. Amen.

Tuesday, March 15 ☩ Exodus 16:2

"Are we there yet?" "How long is this trip?" "My feet hurt." "I'm hungry." "I'm thirsty." "I'm tired of manna for breakfast." "Stop touching me."

I'm not sure how Moses and Aaron put up with 40 years of wilderness travel complaints. We all need our grievances to be heard and acknowledged. Too much complaining, though, wears down those seeking to do right by us. There is a fine line between needing to be heard and being a negative and destructive burden.

God of the weary traveler, the road isn't always easy or smooth and we aren't always easy to journey with. Help us honestly acknowledge the difficulty of our road while also checking ourselves before we burden others with complaints. Amen.

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Wednesday, March 16 ☞ Exodus 16:3

When our circumstances don't live up to our dreams or expectations, it's tempting to desire a return to the past. The Israelites had the promise of a better future to keep them going. But sometimes we need something more tangible. Couples slip wedding rings on each other's fingers as a physical symbol of their vows. God delivered manna from heaven and water from a rock at the most difficult moments in the wilderness journey. We can't go backwards. We must make this road, keeping watch for the tangible signs that God offers in order to make a difficult journey more bearable.

God our Provider, help us recognize the signs you offer to keep us moving forward, to keep us making this road. Amen.

Thursday, March 17 ☞ Exodus 17:2-4

When we feel unsettled, hungry or thirsty, when our schedules are disrupted or a journey drags on, we can get irritable and quarrelsome. Oftentimes, the people to whom we are closest receive the brunt of our bad moods. Moses sacrificed everything to liberate his people, yet here they are ready to stone him. When we feel ugly and upset, it serves us to check in with our emotions to discern their root source. The wilderness is a place of big feelings. But it can also be a place to discover how we react and why.

Savior God, grant us the wisdom to change what we can, to let go of what we can't, and to not take our problems out on those who love us most. Amen.

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Friday, March 18 ☞ Exodus 20:1-17

When we traveled with our young children, my husband and I always tried to keep to the kids' schedule of eating and sleeping. It helped our kids keep their bearings when everything was new and overstimulating. Adults also benefit from structure and clear expectations. God's commandments, delivered in the wilderness, helped a journeying people keep their bearings. These commandments continue to serve us as we make this road through Lent. God's expectations are clear. God has shown us the way. We step forward with this clear map.

God our Parent, thank you for not leaving us to wonder and wander without a road map. Thank you for showing us the foundational stones we need to build our road. Amen.

Saturday, March 19 ☞ Exodus 32:1-6

The temptation to worship idols, to prioritize a thing, an ideology, a person above God is even stronger when the journey takes longer than we expected. COVID-19 and its variants refuse to go away, and our anxiety builds over an uncertain future. But no money, power, nation, or selfish self-pursuit will serve us as well as the God who liberates us. Our minds and hearts are easy prey to idols seeking to enslave and divert us from the good and just path. Christ is our way to freedom.

Living God, help us keep our focus on Christ as we make this road through Lent. Guide our feet in the path of righteousness, avoiding the pitfalls of idolatry. Amen.