

In the Bible, *wilderness* is a place or time of waiting. It's a place or time given to help people be alert to God's next move. You see, God keeps moving, doing new things, if only we'll notice.

Wilderness in this sense is usually unwanted – not where we choose to go. But there we are – by the grace of God. If we're patient with the grace of wilderness, we may find ourselves more able to go with God's next move – rather than the fearful move we might otherwise make.

Grace is God breaking into our lives making a decisive difference – creating possibilities where all we'd seen were impossibilities.

*Without your grace we waste away like flowers that wither and decay.* That's an Advent carol that works in Lent too. *Without your grace we waste away...* Meaning *with* grace, life happens.

Grace says nothing is so far gone that grace can't point us in a fresh direction. A favorite Lenten phrase is: *Restore unto us the joy of your salvation and renew in us a willing spirit.*

Renew is a 5-letter word. Five letters words came to mind as I sat with this week's scriptures. Two 5 letter words are central in our Romans text and the gospel. We'll look at them both: grace and Satan – or devil means the same and is 5 letters too.

There are lots of important 5 letter words: Water. Bread. Sleep. Awake. Trust. Loved. Lover. Birth. Death. Music. We could go on and on, but grace and Satan are before us.

We may think Satan or devil are out of date. In Matthew's day Satan was seen a real – a fallen angel trying to undo God's good work. We may not think of a red figure with a forked tail, but we still hear people say, *The devil made me do it.* Or push responsibility over there to whoever seems most demonic.

Perhaps you heard in this week's news an important person say, *The devil isn't beneath us, but among us.* Today when we use Satan or devil, we usually mean systemic evil bigger than ourselves – out of our control. And it is. Like a bad smell in a pipeline spreading everywhere.

The problem is, we all breathe the air from the pipeline. We can't prevent contamination.

We begin worship, especially in Lent, asking forgiveness for complicity in such things – things that harm others, creation, ourselves, our relationship with God. We confess complicity with blowing bad air even when we have no such intention. *Forgive our sins. known and unknown.*

Satan may not be a word we use much today, but harm blows steadily and we get caught stirring it beyond our will. What are we to do?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels share stories of Jesus in the wilderness tempted by the devil. These are important stories because they show us what Jesus did with the bad air he breathed too because he was fully human – as are we. But Jesus was also fully divine. Jesus wasn't defended against the truth of his belovedness as we often are.

At Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven said, *This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.* We do well to listen to Jesus because we need reminding that we too are beloved. We need to remind each other because it's so human to forget the gnawing hunger we feel isn't always for more food or drink or other good distraction.

Jesus reminds us, "*We do not live by bread alone.*" St. Augustine said, "*Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee, O God.*"

Even we who know this, keep looking for other fills for this sacred place that can only be filled with God. Problem is, we often don't know such a sacred place is there if we haven't allowed for wilderness time and space to get in touch with whose we really are.

It's not without intention that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. There was nothing around but his own inner hunger. And of course, the devil shows up – offering Jesus all manner of great things with which to fill his hunger – though none great enough to satisfy.

We're often oblivious to this deep hunger given us by God – given for relationship with our loving Creator. When we first get a glimpse of our God-shaped longing, we may not know what it is, or what to do with it.

Until we discover it's God hungering for us, we distract ourselves with whatever fun friend or family, food or drink, work or worth can convince us it'll fill our need. For some, unfortunately, it may even be a hunger to have a neighbor's country.

Mis-placed hungers are rampant – some more dangerous than others. We get tempted by less than our real need by things that seem so very good. Until we rest in God's hunger for us we're left wanting.

St. Paul deals with this in today's Romans text. The most important thing about us is: "We belong to God!" We forget that – tempted to think other goods in the world matter more. We lose sight of our real identity as beloved children of God and we hardly know it – unless some wilderness sets in, by the grace of God. Richard Rohr calls this "falling upward."

Next time you get into a slump, ask God to help you *fall upward* through it – into greater trust of God who loves you. It is grace that lets us face the devil, the tempter – *those* false hungers prowling to convince us to fill up with lesser goods. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where Jesus found grace to say "No" to Satan.

Today's other 5-letter word, grace, is God helping us. *Without your grace we waste away.* We hunger for what will not satisfy. Grace is God helping us discover real hungry is for God.

If you get in touch with that hunger, smile at God who hungers for you.

Amen

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