

**SLD05.16.10 Sixth Easter Season of Creation**

**Psalm 18:1-19**

**Romans 8: 18-27**

**Mark 1:9-12**

**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Wild Thing, I Think I Love You!”**

Today is ‘Wilderness Sunday’ and today’s texts, as I read them, invite us to explore the deep relationship between the wilderness and creativity, and between creativity and spirituality. There is great power in these relationships, great and ungovernable power, but also great and healing power, great and redeeming power. The best way for me to understand both the power and the relationship among the three is as the principle, the activity and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And I believe that through whichever gate we enter, wilderness, creativity, or spirituality, the Holy Spirit will promptly weave the others into the our lives.

It’s rather delightful to me for us decent, orderly, and pleasantly predictable Presbyterians to dedicate a Sunday to celebrate the wilderness just for being...wild. Just for being free, untamed, separate, independent, unknowable, ungovernable, raw, and utterly ‘other.’ Surely here in our lovely, well-lit, simple but elegant sanctuary, the preacher in her pulpit and the parishioners in their pews, the irony escapes no one.

*Author Annie Dillard remarks that *The higher Christian churches - where if anywhere I belong- come at God with an air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom.* (p.59 Holy the Firm)<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://doug-subversivevoices.blogspot.com/2009/03/annie-dillard-and-worship.html>

Pushed to say, many of us might prefer a tamer, more predictable God over Dillard's dangerous, service-blasting deity. But the psalmist reminds us of the wild forces of creation and how God employs them for better or for ill, for destruction as well as for deliverance. So perhaps by inviting the wilderness into our sanctuary today and shyly nodding in the direction of the fierce unknowable, we here at Emory Church are beginning to be wise.

For the wilderness has always featured importantly in God's great creation. Remember how In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep? Tohu VaVohu is the Hebrew phrase for that formless void, that emphatic "nothingness" out of which God drew the universe. Over the ages, various rabbis have explained Tohu Vavohu as referring to an "astonishing emptiness," "astonishingly chaotic."<sup>2</sup> Others say "Tohu-Va-Vohu" is a Hebrew nonsense phrase, to be as "wild and waste."<sup>3</sup> In any case, it is from that astonishing chaotic emptiness, that wild, ungovernable wasteland, that Creation itself is...well...created.

For several Sundays now we've been talking about our kinship with creation—how the sky, the oceans, the land, the wilderness all share the same Creator with us, making of us siblings of the one God. And as family, we celebrate one another's delight as well as commiserate with one another's suffering, even as we confess any part we may have in it.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.valdostamuseum.org/hamsmith/Talmud.html#TohuVaVohu>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.twosmallblocks.com/MA07TohuVa.htm>

Today's passage from Romans invites us not only to hear and share Creation's groaning but to anticipate with Creation a day when the planet will be healed and restored to life. "There are three parties groaning in Paul's passage – humans, creation and the Holy Spirit. Our shared groaning reflects not only our shared suffering but also the birth pangs of hope for a new creation through Christ Jesus."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, when Jesus is baptised in our gospel text today, when the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove, Heaven and Earth are united in one human being, Spirit and flesh unite as they did when the first human was created in the garden. Jesus is the new Adam.

And once the Spirit that fills all the Earth fills Jesus in a special way, where does the Spirit drive Jesus? To the wilderness. Upon receiving his special anointing from God, where must Jesus go? To the wilderness. Where is Jesus sent to wrestle with devils and angels and wild beasts that might make him want to play safe, avoid risks, and choose "normal," whatever that looked like for a carpenter's son in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine? To the wilderness. Where will Jesus go to catch up with what has just happened, integrate it in his self-understanding, and discern his next steps? To the wilderness.

It's as if only in the wilderness, in the untamed raw material of creation, in the *tohu vavohu*, can Jesus connect with the fundamental physical, spiritual and existential challenge God has set before him, and grasp its magnitude. Rise to its summons. Surrender to its demand. For all his struggles there, it is the wilderness that gifts Jesus with the wisdom, the clarity, the strength and the blessing to do what God has called

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.seasonofcreation.com/spiritual/third/> .

him to do. For, in all three synoptic gospels, once Jesus emerges from the wilderness, off he goes to Galilee to commence his three years of public ministry.

What do you suppose happened out there?

Arguably, the wilderness is for Jesus the spiritual source of his connectedness to God, to nature, to his deepest self, to his deepest calling. The wilderness is where God cultivates Jesus as the new Adam, grows him, nurtures him, anneals his new identity and makes of God's will and Jesus' will, one will. Just as God formed Creation from *tohu va vohu*, from the astonishing emptiness of the wilderness, God forms, animates and directs Jesus to be the New Creation, the Christ, God enfleshed in the world.

At the very least we can say that in the wilderness, whether existential or material, different systems are at work, different powers are at large, in regard to both the Holy "Other" and the deepest human Self. Maybe the wilderness is where the two intersect, or commune, or briefly become one. In any case, it appears that in the wilderness, something shifts. Some things shift, as in "shift into place." And there comes a clarity, and a burning, and a spontaneity arising from some place other than reason or logic or personal preference. Emerging from the wilderness, one finds oneself less in control of what happens next as awed or instructed or grounded or sure, yet with an afterglow of puzzlement, as when a waking dream makes itself materially manifest.

I'm making this sound more complicated than it is. In her popular book, *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron says it better when she remarks that creativity is the natural order of life, that there is an underlying, indwelling creative force infusing all of life, and that when we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the Creator's

creativity within us and our lives. Creativity is God's gift to us, says Cameron, and using our creativity is our gift back to God.

If the idea that our Creator actively encourages our creativity and drives us to a wilderness in order to discover it is a radical thought to you, consider that upon receiving the anointing of the Spirit, where Jesus goes to get his head on straight is not to the temple or the Torah or his parents. To figure out who he is, what God wants him to do, and how on earth he is going to do it, where Jesus must go is to the wilderness, the tohu vavohu, the formless, unpredictable, struggle-filled, astonishingly empty, astonishingly chaotic wasteland of new beginnings.

If this seems an important word to some of us, surely it is an essential teaching for any graduate embarking on a new era of his or her life. Feminist theologian Mary Daly suggests that it's the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God. And I suggest that the wilderness, whether inside or out, is where we must go, and keep going, to figure out who we are, what God wants us to do, and how on earth we're going to do it.

So let us be wise and praise the wilderness, perhaps even welcome, preserve and protect it, for through it all creation groans to be delivered.

To the glory of God. Amen.